

**Indians in Hong Kong:**  
**A Study of Ethnic Associations and Ethnicity**

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## **Abstract**

Indians have been linked with Hong Kong since the commencement of colonial period. They have continued to share the historical, business, military, and cultural life with Hong Kong. In this study, I will look at how cultural activities that are organized by Indian associations create, reinforce, and develop cultural identities among members. During the research, I used participant observation method, attending organized activities and interviewing participants of these activities. Through the study of ethnic markers, I hope to achieve a better understanding of Indians' perception towards Hong Kong and Hong Kong Chinese. We can also look at the maintenance of ethnic boundary of each ethnic group and learn more about the relationships between ethnic groups among the Indian communities, who have settled in Hong Kong at different time periods. I would like to explore the fluidity of the idea of transnationalism and its practice among Hong Kong Indians. The "nuclear tests debate" will be considered as a discourse to further examine the relations of Indians to the large society as a whole(Hong Kong) and to their homeland(India). The study of Hong Kong Indians and their organizational life give us a better understanding of Hong Kong Indians as a minority group, as well as issues on ethnicity and identity.

## 論文摘要

自香港被殖民政府統治後，印度人便成為香港歷史、商務、軍事及文化的一部份。本研究主要以深入訪談及參與觀察等方法搜集資料，從而探討印度的文化組織如何建構、確認及加強參與者的族群身份，藉此反映印度人對居住地(香港)及香港人的看法。此研究可以剖析成員在確認身份的過程中如何「維持界限」，同時以「核武」的爭議作為公共論述，看文化組織參與者的身份認同，並對「誇國主義」作更深入瞭解。最後筆者希望藉研究香港印度人組織性的生活加深我們對他們作為少數族群的認識，藉此探索族群身份認同的問題。



## **Acknowledgement**

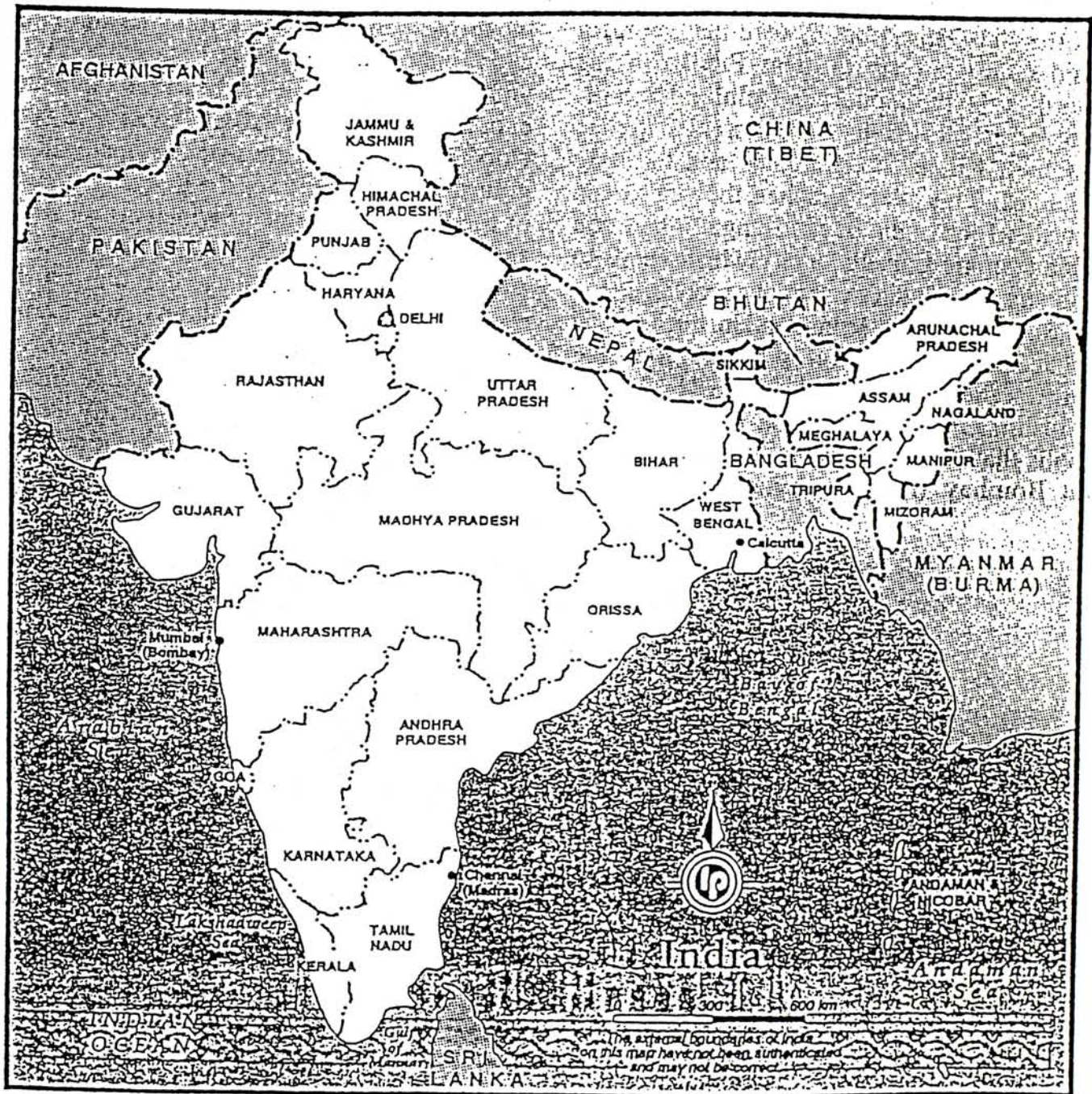
I owe a debt of gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Tan Chee Beng, who inspired me to further pursue on this topic. Special thanks go to Dr. Joseph Bosco and Dr. Sidney Cheung for their advice and support. I would also like to thank the following organizations for being so open and helpful: The Consulate General of India, Council of Hong Kong Indian Associations, The Tamil Cultural Associations, India Association Hong Kong, The Hong Kong Indian Women's Club and my anonymous informants.

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# MAP OF INDIA

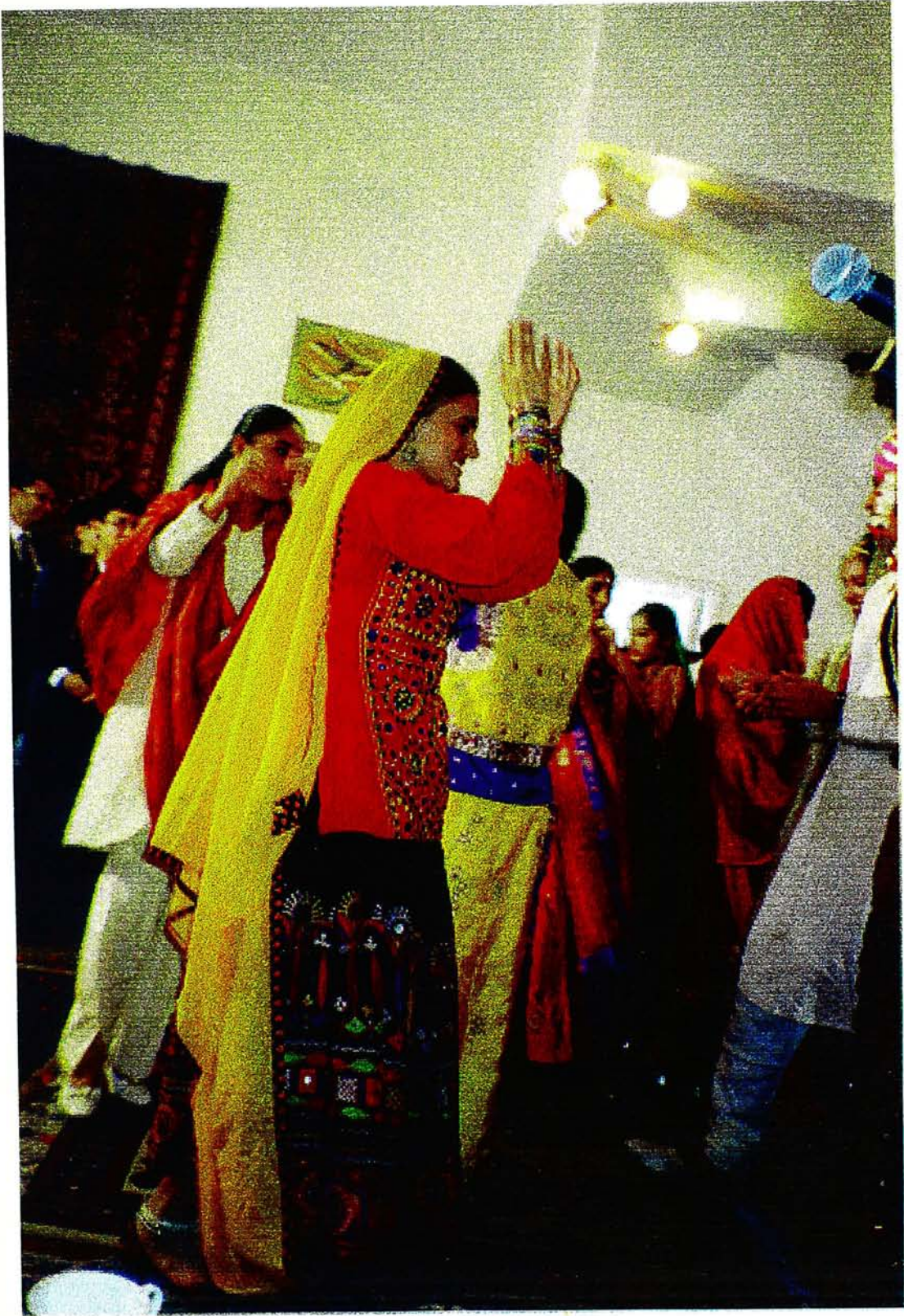






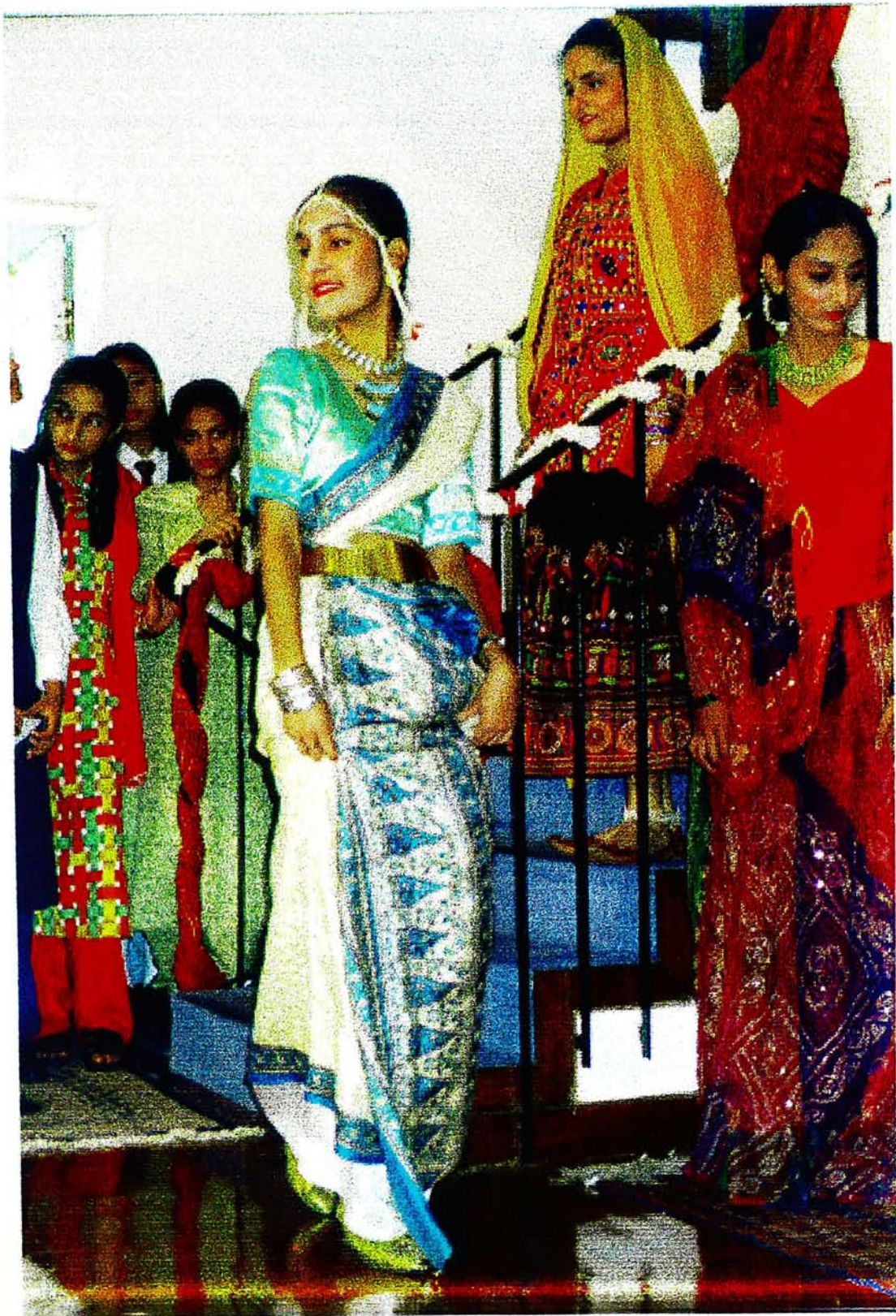
An inauguration ceremony of a permanent plaque for a library to Sir Ellis Kadoorie School donated by the Hong Kong Indian Women's Club in 1998.





A dancing scene during the performance for the inauguration ceremony.





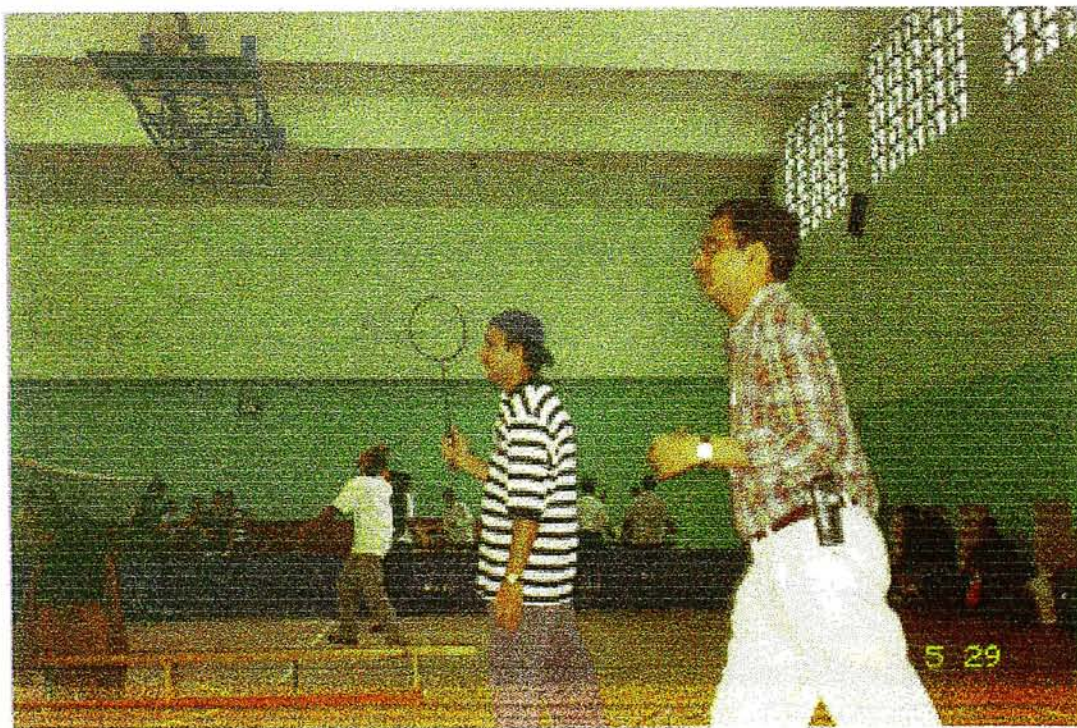
A student dressed in traditional Indian costume performed for the fashion show during the inauguration ceremony.



A Collection of Indian musical instrument in the house of the General Counsel, where the inauguration ceremony was taken place.







A picnic organized by The Tamil Cutlraul Association of Pak Tam Chung in 1998, where members could enjoy both indoor and outdoor activities.



## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### Scope of Study

I started to have interest to know more about Indian communities in Hong Kong when I was studying at a government-sponsored English high school. Some of my schoolmates were Indians and we shared the same academic interests. Owing to the increase in the number of Indian students, my school employed several Indian teachers in 1980's. Through interacting with these Indian teachers and students, I had the chance to learn more about Indian communities in Hong Kong. First of all, I was impressed with Hong Kong Indians' fluency in English. Meanwhile, their competence to understand Cantonese, their knowledge of Hong Kong pop stars and Hong Kong "stuff" were all impetus for me to learn more about their culture and their experience in Hong Kong.

In fact, I was not the only exception with ethnic minorities as classmates. According to *1996 Hong Kong Yearbook*, out of the six million people in Hong Kong, the Chinese accounted for 95%, the remaining 5% being ethnic minorities. Of the minorities, Indians from the Indian Subcontinent numbered to 25,000 (1996), and about 30% of them were born in Hong Kong (White 1994: 4).

Indians, in the broadest sense, are people from the Indian Subcontinent. In this paper, I would like to limit my informants to Indians who are from India. The associations studied have members who are mostly from the country. Most of the historical records have only information on migrants from the Indian Subcontinent, without specifying which country. In Chinese, Indians (*yun doh yan*) are people

specifically from India, which has a different meaning from English. After all, it is difficult to find out how many Indians were actually from India since the early arrivals came from the subcontinent, which was divided into Pakistan and India after the Independence in 1947. After all, the estimation provided by the Census Report revealed a gradual and steady growth of Indian population in Hong Kong over the years.

Indians have participated in historical, business, military, political, and cultural life of Hong Kong since the commencement of the colonial rule. They came along with the British as small traders and merchants with limited knowledge of English. They were regarded as good businessmen who participated in tailoring, catering, electronics, as well as import and export trading. Nowadays, many of them are fluent in both English and Chinese for the purpose of business. According to the 12 April 1990 issue of *Far Eastern Economic Review*, a total of approximately 400 Indian trading firms in Hong Kong contributed to 10% of Hong Kong's annual export in the year 1989. Meanwhile, the Indian Chamber of Commerce was established in 1952 as a representative body of Indian business community in Hong Kong.

However, the social and political conditions of Hong Kong do not leave much room for South Asian minorities to grow. Socially, Indians are often nicknamed with derogatory terms like "Ah Chai" and "Ah Singh". "Ah Singh" probably comes from the last name of many Sikhs and Chinese always generalize people from Indian Subcontinent as one group. Without getting much understanding from Hong Kong Chinese, Indians live in a closed system, maintaining close ties within their own sub-communities. They do not form a single community and have little contact with the majority Chinese population.



Politically, they have ambiguous status. Indians were neglected in the Sino-British Joint Declaration reached in 1984. Like orphans, they were abandoned by both Britain and China, and they could not return to India as "overseas" Indians are encouraged by the Indian Government to stay at their residing countries. Indians, who hold British passports have the status of British over-seas nationals only, but they do not have the rights to reside in England, like many other Hong Kong Chinese. On the other hand, China, the sovereignty state of Hong Kong since 1997, does not seem to care much about the fate of minority groups in Hong Kong but focus on enhancing the sense of Chinese nationalism among "Hong Kongese" (White 1994: 1). Meanwhile, the relationship between China and India has reached another critical moment as recent nuclear tests in India are threatening not only Pakistan but also China. India's Minister of Defence even openly claimed that the demonstration of nuclear power is mainly targeting at China - the "First Enemy of Delhi" (Ming Pao, 8/5/1998). Besides, India's interference of the Chinese rule in Tibet has further intensified the relationship between the two nations.

In Hong Kong, Indian entrepreneurs just like all other local people, suffer from the blow of economic downturn that the territory is experiencing. Indians have to share a gloomy future under the influence of the political and economic situations of Hong Kong.

Indians in Hong Kong have their own practices of religions, languages, food habits, patterns of social relations and cultural values. They have built up strong networks among themselves and established numerous Indian ethnic associations with different backgrounds. Some associations are under the umbrella of the Council of Hong Kong Indian Associations (CHIA) -- which is recognised by the Consulate General of India as the representing body of Indian communities in the

territory. These associations organize cultural, religious, and philanthropic activities in addition to annual celebrations such as Independence Day and Indian New Year. Besides, there are regional associations, such as Tamil and Gujarati Association, which are outside the network of CHIA. Through all these organizations, Hong Kong Indians maintain formal and informal links with the Consulate General of India. These associations also attempt to reach out and promote Indian culture by organizing activities.

On 21 April 1998, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong SAR Mr. Tung Chee-wah and his wife were invited to a private party organized by CHIA at Holiday Inn, Golden Miles. At the party, Mr. Tung addressed the issue of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong, revealing that the SAR Government recognizes the importance of Indian associations and are concern about ethnic minorities in Hong Kong.

As there are limited available works on Hong Kong Indians, in this research, I will study the cultural and group identity of the Indians in Hong Kong by looking at selected Indian associations. I will examine how the organized activities of the associations promote the group identity and Indian cultural identity. My focus will be on two associations: The India Association Hong Kong and The Hong Kong Indian Women's Club, which are under the Council of Hong Kong Indian Association (CHIA) -- the largest Indian associational network in Hong Kong. A regional body called Tamil Cultural Association will be included in the study as well. I interviewed members of all these associations so as to know their views on themselves and Hong Kong society. For example, how do Hong Kong Indians identify themselves? Can cultural activities organised within the communities help them maintain their cultural identity? In the study, I will also consider the fact that members of these associations may belong to a particular class.



Through the study of Hong Kong Indians and their organizational life, we can have a better understanding of Hong Kong Indians as a minority group. Besides, we can know more about their relations with the larger society as a whole. In additions, I hope to further explore the concept of ethnicity and identity through examining the relations between Hong Kong Indians and their host society Hong Kong, as well as their homeland, India.

## **Literature Review and Theoretical Discussion**

There are only two major publications on the Indians in Hong Kong, namely: *The Overseas Indian Community in Hong Kong* by K. N. Vaid (1973) and *Turbans & Traders* by Barbara-Sue White (1984). Vaid's book helps us understand the changes in the lives of Hong Kong Indians up to 1970s. White's book, which is a more recent publication, describes South Asian traditions and adaptation in Hong Kong. It covers various aspects of cultural life. Although her work is a general discussion without detail information on associations, it provides some interesting observations. For instance, she found Indians belonged to four communities: his family, his group, an Indian in Hong Kong and his mother country, India (White 1994: 2). In this thesis, I would like to further explore these four categories and their influence on our understanding of Indians in Hong Kong.

Using the study of ethnicity is one way to look at the present Indian migrants who have settled outside India and form various sub-groups. As we all know, people organize themselves into groups and establish a sense of solidarity among themselves with a dynamic identity. In the study of ethnic groups, Barth has marked a new era with his theory and usage of the term "ethnic group" separating itself from the previous studies on tribes in Africa (1969: 10-11). The influence

of Weber in his definition of the term “ethnic group” as “mass status group” emphasizes the importance of both subjective and objective aspects as well as the balance between cultural and political bases (Hutchison & Smith 1996: 32). Barth, at a different level, has linked the issue of ethnic identity to the social boundary of groups: the ethnic boundary is not determined by identifying cultural characteristics (content of the group) but maintenance of the boundary and group recruitment (Barth 1969: 14). The boundary is not a fixed but a permeable one. It allows transactions across the border, which in turn strengthens the boundary (Hutchison & Smith 1996: 9). Therefore, the group exists only if there is another group to contrast with. It also shows that the ethnic group is more like a social construction than a prior existence. Indeed, Barth's idea of ethnic group has shed light on the study of ethnicity.

Besides Barth, other scholars are also interested in studying ethnicity, which has become a major topic in anthropology. They can be divided into two schools of thought, the primordialist (Geertz, 1963, Shils 1957) and the instrumentalist (Banton, 1983, Cohen 1974). However, my position will fall into neither of them, for they both cannot fully explain the current situation of ethnic groups. The instrumentalists disregard the sentiments that a person has towards the group. They over-emphasize the consciousness of people in picking and choosing their identity within a given context. To a certain extent, ethnicity is being used instrumentally for getting resources as many researches have shown, but the instrumental explanation undermines the long-term significance of ethnicity in the society. On the other hand, primordialists focus on the “givenness” of primordial ties but they cannot explain the ethnic change that has taken place in reality. To sum up, I will pay attention to both approaches in this thesis.



In the study of ethnic identity of minority groups, assimilationist-pluralist approach is commonly used to study overseas Indians and overseas Chinese. However, as the degree of assimilation or acculturation of a group in the dominant society varies, it is difficult to generalise outcomes under a general theoretical direction that the group either conforms to the majority group or simply maintains a separate identity (Driedger 1989: 48).

Previous studies of overseas Indians including the Gujaratis in East Africa and Chettiars in Burma, often categorized overseas Indians as the classical ethnic middleman type (Zenner 1991: 88). In many colonial societies, this theory can be widely applied. The middlemen minority theory identifies three groups of people in the society, the elite, the masses and the middlemen who serve as the bridge between the other two groups (Bonacich 1973). Regarding the situation of Hong Kong Indians, the theory can be applied to the period when the British first occupied Hong Kong. However, business opportunities offered by Hong Kong as a financial centre have changed the passive position of Indians as middlemen between foreigners and Chinese. The multicultural capitalistic society of Hong Kong is no longer constituted by two classes. Therefore, the role of middlemen is no longer necessary. Instead, they establish themselves as a prominent group of businessmen. The business network has been extended to global level covering Hong Kong, India and many other countries. The class model of middlemen theory also indicates that the group is excluded from the majority population by languages, race, religion, and other cultural characteristics (Zenner 1991: 134). But many Hong Kong Indians speak good Cantonese, while English is widely spoken too.

Hong Kong is at the phase of the centralization of the state power and Hong Kong people are more conscious of their own identity after the hand over. Its return



to China brings her to an awkward development stage of being a “Specialized Administrative Region (SAR)”. Its departure from the British rule to China raises questions on the future of the minorities and at the same time intensifies the issue of ethnicity. They worry about their possible lost of citizenship in the territory as well as their wealth from accumulated over generations (Satyanarayan 2/10/1995). After all, what is the status of Indians in Hong Kong after the era of colonialism?

Some scholars have used the concept of diaspora to shed light on the study of ethnic minorities. It is always interesting to consider the fluidity and the ambivalent feeling of attachment when looking at diaspora groups. To a certain extent, the study of Indian diaspora can contribute to the understanding of Hong Kong Indians as well. However, it is important to note that diaspora has a special usage in the case of Jewish immigrants who regard themselves as leaving a specific homeland. Under the influence of a dystopic experience, they have a utopian projection of their homeland (Clifford 1994: 305).

In recent studies, the term diaspora has been given a different definition. One definition given by Safran (1991: 83-84) is as follows:

The expatriate minority communities are composed by those who

1. are dispersed from an original ‘centre’ to at least two “peripheral places”;
2. maintain a memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland;
3. believe that they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host country;
4. see the ancestral home as a place of eventual return, when the time is right;
5. are committed to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland; and
6. consider the group’s consciousness and solidarity are “importantly defined” by this continuing relationship with the homeland.

It seems that Safran's criteria are as limited as those adopted as ethnic markers in previous ethnicity studies. Although the Indians in Hong Kong do not necessarily conform to these qualities of "ideal type" of diaspora group, it is worthwhile to consider certain points. For example, expatriate minority communities are dispersed from one "original centre" to at least two "peripheral places" which is quite limiting in its categorization. It is interesting to know the reasons behind that diaspora groups are defined as expatriate minority communities dispersed to at least two "peripheral places" but not less in order to be considered as diaspora groups. In the case of Hong Kong, many local Indians are dispersed from India to Hong Kong but not other places. They identify strongly with their homeland India and they do maintain solidarity through connecting with their home country. Hong Kong Indians are also committed to the maintenance and restoration of their homeland in needed situations with individual and collective efforts. Besides, they do not necessarily identify India as a home of eventual return even though they may continue to maintain a memory, vision, or myth about their original place in organized activities of associations.

Description from Paul Gilroy is more useful to my study. Diaspora group has a different public sphere, in which they establish a community of different consciousness and solidarity outside the framework of the national time/space (Gilroy 1987). Through the study, we can see how Indians live under a different framework of time and space after moving away from India for such a long time. James Clifford has another interpretation for the term "diaspora", which brings the concept to a wider context. "The term is a signifier, not simply of transnationality and movement, but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contests of displacement" (Clifford 1994: 308). The memory and the



conceptual reality (myth) place the person in the category of a diaspora group. Hong Kong Indians do not necessarily have this complex. And yet, as many still have strong sentiments towards India, there is a constant struggle for them to redefine their identity through association activities under the experience of displacement. Indians can feel comfortable with their host society, and they may consider the territory as their home. In the meantime, they also establish a link with India where they are originated.

And yet, the application of “diaspora group” under cultural studies seems to disregard the existence of national boundary and concentrate only on the ideological level. Instead of using the word “diaspora”, I will use “transnationalism” to explain my ideas.

Transnationalism offers another way to look at ethnicity through networking. Many Indians in Hong Kong maintain a close linkage with India, and this transnationalism can be defined as “a process by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement” (Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton 1992: 1). The usage of the word “immigrants” is rejected by Schiller, Basch & Blanz-Szanton as it “evokes images of permanent rupture” (1994: 3-4). Since the world is bounded by capitalism and hegemony of the state, transmigrants have “multiple identities, grounded both in their society of origin and in the host societies (Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton 1992: 11).

When Indians move out from their homeland, they become more aware of the differences between themselves and the people of the host country, who are the majority group they reside with. Certain adjustment is necessary in order to live in a foreign environment. Hong Kong Indians also learn to accommodate to the life in the territory

On the other hand, Indians have the opportunities to create and invent their own traditions as a diaspora group. Hobsbawm has pointed out that traditions are actually invented and constructed and instituted and “those emerging in a less uneasily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period (1983: 1)”. The study of Hong Kong Indians reveals how various groups adjust between the modern life and their traditions. For example, “Divali” is used by Hindus to mark the commencement of a new business year whereas in the old days, it marked as the beginning of a crop year. Bonus of around HK\$100 is given to workers as a gift at Divali and another one will also be given during the Chinese New Year. At the host country, ethnicity is being constructed and reconstructed as members are being put together under a framework different from national time/space. Through organized activities of associations, members maintain their linkage with India. Meanwhile, they can express their ethnic identity through these activities with their own interpretation of Indian culture.

According to James Clifford’s article on “diaspora”, diaspora groups do impose threat to the power of the state and the integrity of its nationalism when diaspora groups find their collective identity (1994: 308). In the book *Imagined Communities*, Anderson (1983) emphasizes that nationalism is a construction of the state with its hegemony. This has influenced many to rethink about ethnicity. In the conceptualization of nationalism, there is a certain degree of fluidity and flexibility and the most important of all, the essence of imagination. The national boundary of European states, studied by Anderson, is further reinforced by the invention of printing and the advancement of communication.

Meanwhile, Hong Kong Indians, who faced the sovereignty change of the host society, worried that a rise in national consciousness of Hong Kong Chinese



might cause anti-foreign sentiments. As migrants, their identities are ambiguous. They are under constraints from their identities as immigrants, who may be in tension with the ideologies of the state as they impose a threat towards the hegemony of the state. For example, Hong Kong Indians, although had little impact on the negotiation between Britain and China before 1997 on policies dealing with ethnic minorities, their actions aroused much public sympathy.

Appadurai, further developed Anderson's idea to conclude "imagined world are multiple worlds which are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe" (1990: 296-297). His usage of "scapes" can further illustrate the fluidity of the global cultural flows of the world. One of the flows is "ethnoscape". It refers to "the landscape of persons, who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers and other moving groups and persons constitute an essential feature of the world, and appear to affect the politics of and between nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree" (Appadurai 1990: 297). Appadurai perceives that ethnic politics are influenced by the integration of media, state, capital and technology. Such an integration arouses ethnic sentiments, which have the power to "ignite intimacy into a political sentiment and turn locality into a staging ground for identity" (1990: 306). In the paper, by drawing examples of Hong Kong Indians, I will investigate how ethnic identity becomes a force of political expression in the discussion of nuclear technology.

As ethnic sentiment can be traced more easily in a collective form, the study of associations can offer such an advantage to scholars in the study of ethnicity. According to previous studies on political and legal philosophy, there are two principles that associations often follow: shared commitment and legal principal,



which enable associations to function by formal rules (Fuller 1969: 6). In the past, scholars have emphasized the role of associations as a way for people to adapt to social changes. African tribal associations are said to serve as tools for enhancing ethnicity and reducing inter-tribal fiction (Little 1973). He discusses the functions of associations in helping individuals to adapt to modern society. In the study of Chinese associations, in order to establish relations with their country, people find memberships in associations once they are out of their hometown. The development of regional associations provides comforts to newcomers who are away from home. These associations still maintain the role of helping individuals in socio-cultural adjustment. However, recent studies of communal associations reveal certain changes in the roles of associations. For example, the study of the indigenous communities of Sarawak concludes that the roles of associations have changed from a vehicle for social adjustment to political involvement (Tan 1994: 4, 5).

As many Hong Kong Indians have resided in the territory for a long time, social adjustment is no longer the major function of associations. These Indians, so-called settlers, want to stay in Hong Kong. For those who are sojourners with good educational background, the need to fully engage in the life of the host society is limited as they only plan to temporarily stay in Hong Kong. However, both settlers and sojourners actively participate in associations. Members can achieve socio-cultural satisfaction through joining activities of associations (Attach-Poku 1996: 28). Associations can serve as channels for them to manifest their ethnic identity.

Activities do establish a network inside and outside of the associations, within communities as well as stretching outside Hong Kong. In this thesis, I will

look further into Hong Kong Indians' expression of their ethnic identity through activities organized by associations. As associations have clearly marked the boundaries between different groups, we can see how Indians present their ethnic identity through the maintenance of these boundaries. Through interviewing members of associations, we can have a better understanding of the maintenance of ethnic boundary between Indians and Chinese as well as between sojourners and settlers. They can also offer a clear picture of how the transnational network is established through physical linkage as well as emotional attachment.

## **Methodology**

To study the community building of Hong Kong Indians, who participate in organised activities, I employed participant observations and interviews for data collection. English was used as the medium language in conducting the research. Being a native Cantonese speaker with overseas studying experience in the United States, I speak both English and Cantonese (some of my informants do speak Cantonese). Before carrying in-depth fieldwork, a preliminary fieldwork with a few informants allowed me to test out my conversational fluency in the field as well as enhance my cultural knowledge of the group.

During fieldwork, I employed snowball sampling in finding my informants. To establish network and collect background information, I conducted interviews with twenty-five informants. I also conducted ten informal interviews (Appendix I). Meanwhile, I asked various associations under the umbrella of Council of Hong Kong Indian Association for permission to participate in their activities.

I chose four activities organized by members of CHIA--India Association Hong Kong and Hong Kong Indian Women's Club-- as part of my study. For each



activity, I interviewed six informants who are either organisers or participants. Furthermore, I visited the Consulate General of India where ample information on immigrants as well as recent activities organised by different communities is provided. To supplement the study, I had included Tamil Cultural Association, a regional association outside the umbrella of CHIA, in the study. A number of informants who are not involved in associational activities are interviewed.

During interviews, I encouraged informants to talk about their personal experience in Hong Kong. Topics covered in the interviews were pretty broad, for example, background of the informants, their history of migration, personal experience in Hong Kong, their engagement in organized activities and the establishment of transnational network.

Pamphlets and other advertising materials were collected to assist in determining the nature of activities. Besides, the way activities are advertised, charges involved, types of invitation (private or open to public), and the goals of the activities are under consideration.

As it would take a considerable amount of time in getting to know my informants, the entire project took approximately one year, from March 1998 to January 1999 and I focused myself on fieldwork between July and December 1998. I had devoted the first two months of my project, starting from May 1998. In the next two months, I carried out intensive interviews with informants and actively participated in their activities. In October, I participated in their biggest celebration: Divali, Indian New Year. Unfortunately, July and August are months for Indians to go back to India for visits. As a result, I prolonged my interview period until the end of December in order to include more informants in the study.

Each informant was informed that I am a student of CUHK who was conducting a project on Hong Kong Indians. Name cards were given to each informant. I also gained permissions from each organiser to attend activities. Conversations were recorded during interviews upon the consensus of the informants and all were transcribed on papers. Field notes were written after activities.

My concern is that it is easy to fall into the disadvantage of using snowball sampling as certain types or groups of informants are more likely to be interviewed. Also, due to the limitation in time for my fieldwork, I was forced to choose associations that are more active in providing activities. One of the reasons that Hong Kong India Association was studied is because of its long history in Hong Kong, other than Hong Kong Indian Chamber of Commerce. Gender bias is my other concern. In the preliminary research period, I noticed that I had more contact with male than female informants, as predominately males were involved in association activities. Indian Women's Club helped me reach more female informants and provided me with more communal activities that I was interested in. To have a broader understanding of Indian-based associations, I also studied Tamil Cultural Association. My contact with Tamil Cultural Association was established through the introduction of my key informant. Although I attempted to contact another co-ed school with a significant number of Indian students, the proposal was declined as they had accepted numerous research applications.

## **Layout of the Thesis**

In chapter 1, a brief introduction of the topic is given in addition to a discussion of theories and methods employed for this thesis. In chapter 2, I will look at the history of Indians in Hong Kong and their relationship to the territory.



In chapter 3, I will provide background information on associations studied as well as activities or selected associations. Through the study of organized activities, I hope to learn more about Hong Kong Indians' presentation of themselves as an ethnic group. In Chapter 4, through the study of ethnic markers, I hope to achieve a better understanding on Indians' perception towards Hong Kong and Hong Kong Chinese. We can also look at the maintenance of ethnic boundary of each ethnic group and learn more about the relationships between ethnic groups in Indian communities, who have settled in Hong Kong at different time periods. In chapter 5, I would like to explore the fluidity of the idea of transnationalism and its practice among Hong Kong Indians. The "nuclear tests debate" will be considered as a discourse to further examine the relationship between Hong Kong Indians and their homeland India

## **Chapter 2**

# **The Historical Background and Settlement of Indians in Hong Kong**

### **Historical Background of Indians in Hong Kong**

Indians have settled in Hong Kong since the colonial period. The history of settlement could be traced back to the British's colonization of Hong Kong in 1841, with the arrival of 2,700 Indian soldiers and four Indian merchants (Das 1990: 148). Many British companies in Hong Kong were at first involved in opium trading, which created a triangular trade relationship between China, Britain and India. Without exception, the first group of Indian traders, mostly from Parsi and Bohra communities, were also involved in the business. According to the first official Government Censors Report, there were around 1,453 Indians in Hong Kong before World War (WWI) (White, 1994: 34). The Sindhis who constitute the majority Indian population in Hong Kong arrived after World War II (WWII).

At that time, the immigration pattern of Indians to Hong Kong was very typical: young fellows coming along with older relatives. Young men came to Hong Kong mainly for job opportunities under the introduction and supervision of relatives and family friends -- an effective way of social control. Traditional business operates on the basis of family unit. Burton Benedict explains that family role relationship and familial loyalty are exploited for the decision making of business (Benedict 1968: 3-5).

Immigrants from India were seldom accompanied by their wives. Families were not brought along to Hong Kong because many Indians were employed in



military services, which did not permit bringing family members. In the case of some who migrated with their wives to Hong Kong, their children were often sent back to India for education, to be in tune with the homeland.

Business and civil services were the two major categories that most Indians were employed. Hong Kong's open port policy did attract a large number of businessmen. The second generation would follow the footsteps of their parents and work for their shops or companies. As they had set their mind for money making, cultural life was not emphasized. Professionals were limited because they were desperately needed in their home country as well.

Indeed, under the colonial rule, Indians were served as a buffer and a bridge between English and Chinese. That partly explained why such a good number of Indians were employed under the Police Force and Civil Services during the time. India, as part of British Empire, offered cheap labourers to work in overseas countries. In 1931, Mr. Sital, the chairman of Council of the Hong Kong India Association (CHIA), reported that among 3,475 Hong Kong Indians, almost 1,800 Indians were employed by the Government (Das 1990: 148). It was not until post war that more professionals had come to Hong Kong. Still, many were restricted from certain professions such as editors or journalists.

During WWII, many Indians in military force had participated in defending the territory of Hong Kong. Indian businessmen also struggled for survival. The ration of food and other supplies had put Indians into a difficult situation as many were involved in small business. The life of Hong Kong had come down to a very slow pace due to the war. Although Hindus were granted the right to conduct religious services by Japanese, in order to earn their support in the war, many ceremonies such as weddings and funerals were not carried out vibrantly until the

end of the war (White 1994: 45-47). Only a few ceremonies took place quietly. Indians, during the time of difficulty, were closely knitted together.

The end of the war turned the history of Hong Kong to a new page. After the War, the economic boom in Hong Kong brought the city back to its routine life. With the increase influx of Indians to Hong Kong after WWII, Indian cultural organizations became more active.

The insecure feeling still existed in the Indian communities in Hong Kong in the 50s and 60s. Many incidents happened behind the scenes, making it difficult to understand Hong Kong Indians thoroughly. In the post war economy, both Hong Kong Chinese and ethnic minorities were struggling. At that time, the official statistics from the government did not provide the number of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong as there was a pre-assumption that in such a metropolitan city, place of birth was not necessary to be considered. This assumption also revealed that ethnic minorities were categorized as one single community. Since the city had just experienced Japanese occupation, negative feeling towards foreigners was aroused after intense foreign suppression. My informant, Mr. Y, could clearly recall the emotional reaction of Hong Kong Chinese at that period. "They were (Hong Kong Chinese) a bit intolerant. They thought that Indian means something, Kwei Lo (white people) means something." With a brief silence, he continued. "Perhaps, Chinese immigrants worried that their jobs were taken away by ethnic minorities in Hong Kong." With flows of memories coming into his mind, he tried to look for an excuse for such an action. "People do change," he concluded.

As pointed out by Mr. Y, in the 80s anti-foreign attitude became less, due to the economic boom of Hong Kong. The frequent interactions between Hong Kong Chinese and foreigners enhanced cultural understanding between two sides.



However, Hong Kong was under another pressure when Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed in 1984. The status of Hong Kong ethnic minorities under The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government (The HKSAR Government) was not mentioned under the Declaration. Anxiety built up to a climax following the Tiananmen Square incident on 4 June 1989. Not only Hong Kong Chinese but also Indians were shocked by the way adopted by the Chinese government to handle the issue.

On 1 July 1997, China resumed its sovereignty over Hong Kong. Transferring from a colonial city to a Special Administrative Region, Hong Kong has gone through the transition from a colonial city to a region of a country. During the transition, the insecurity feeling hit the minorities again, for their status were still unclear.

Despite feeling insecure, many Indians still support the return of Hong Kong to China. An Indian critic once said, "though careful not to be seen taking a public stand on the issue, many Indians privately sympathise with Beijing's position on Hong Kong" (Satyanarayan 2/10/1995). As Hong Kong in the period of transition was under the power play between China and Britain, Indians came to identify with the situation of the territory. He also mentioned that as "the manoeuvring of the British in the name of democracy is too reminiscent of the colonial politics that led to the bloody partition of British India and the creation of Pakistan", many Indians tend to support China on this issue (Gemini News Service, S Satyanarayan 2/10/1995). Perhaps, this reason had motivated many Indians to support the Chinese Government in the process of negotiations. On an email message, Nayan Chanda<sup>1</sup> suggested another possibility of Indians' support towards the SAR Government: "those who are

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<sup>1</sup> An Indian journalist who is the deputy editor of the *Far East Eastern Economic Review*.

afraid of the takeover of Hong Kong by socialist China are the underprivileged. Many Hong Kong Indians belong to the middle-class, with sufficient resources to leave the city if there is any changes.”

Regardless of their reasons, after the hand over, the Indians have confidence in the SAR Government despite of the fact that they are hard hit by the economic recession. Indians in Hong Kong still have a strong sense of belonging to the territory. At the following session, we can see how Indians participate in Hong Kong history through various means, such as associations, from past to present. From this, we can have a better idea of the relationship between Indians and Hong Kong.

### **Distribution Pattern of Indians in Hong Kong**

According to the statistics given by The Consulate General of India, there are around 25,000-28,000 people from the Indian Subcontinent in Hong Kong, of which approximately 22,000 hold Indian passports. The number can vary because quite a number of them are British passport holders, especially those who have been residing in Hong Kong for a long period of time. Many Sindhis carrying British passports also identify themselves as Indians because many of them do not have close contact with Pakistan after India's Independence. Meanwhile, some Indians come via tourist visas and get their identity cards after getting married with local Chinese. All these factors make it difficult to determine the actual number of Indians in Hong Kong.

The major Indian religious communities in Hong Kong are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Parsi, and Christian. Prominent regional groups are Sindhis, Gujarati, Marwaris, Bengalis, South Indians, Sri Lankans, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis



(White 1984). These sub-groups gradually evolved into interest groups and established their own organizations. Besides than associations under CHIA, religious and regional associations, there are also organizations such as Cricket Club, Indian Resources Group and Indian Art Circle which cater for different needs of the communities. Other wealthy Indians participate in local prestigious clubs such as The Rotary Club and The Hong Kong Jockey Club. A weekly radio program is sponsored by local communities for entertaining local Indians. In addition, there are many other diverse activities going on among the Indian communities. For example, the Muslim Association has established an international elementary school at Yuen Long, for Indian and Pakistani children living in the New Territories.

In the past, most Hong Kong Indians were engaged in business and security fields. In recent years, however, the number of Indians in Police Force has dropped, but there are still 7,000 to 8,000 Indians from the continent that work as watchmen and guards in the territory (White 1994: 118). About 500-600 Indians work for the Hong Kong Government under various departments. Many Indians are employed by Indian banks as well as acting as heads of India sectors for international banks. There are twenty to thirty Indians who are journalists of Hong Kong major newspapers. There are also a number of Indian women who are teachers in schools or professors in colleges. Some Indians come to work as domestic helpers for these Indian families in Hong Kong (White 1994: 6).

Many Indians are indeed self-employed. They participate in businesses such as import and export, tailoring as well as the gem business. Indians have export inexpensive manufactory goods from South and East Asian countries to all over the world. Many Indian businessmen have their offices and shops in places like Tsim Sha Tsui and Central. Chungking Mansion and Wynham Street become known

gathering spots of Indians. Chungking Mansion is a multi-ethnic building, located at Tsim Sha Tsui, with many retail shops at the first two floors which serve as the outlet of the import and export business of many Indians. Wynham Street, at the fringe of Central business district, is occupied by Indian business firms and carpet shops. Also, there are an increasing number of local Indians living in the New Territories. Although most Indians are in business, there is an influx of Indian professionals in the last twenty years. They might have been attracted by the following reasons: a free port which is ideal for business and job opportunities, its proximity to India.

### **Immigration Policies**

According to the Basic Law, those who have resided in Hong Kong for more than seven years are allowed to apply for Hong Kong identity cards. Before 1997, holders of Hong Kong IDs who applied for British Dependency Territories Citizenship (BDTC) would receive British National Overseas Passports (BNO). However, BNO holders do not have the right to reside in Britain and their BNO would be valid for 50 years after 1997. BNOs cannot be passed to the next generation. After that, these passport holders need to seek citizenship elsewhere. For families who have lived in Hong Kong for generations, they fear that their children may become stateless. Over 4,000 minorities like Sri Lankans and Pakistanis had agitated for British Citizenship (Satyanarayan 2/10/1995).

Not all minorities from the Indian Subcontinent were granted the Right of Abode or British passports. Only a small number of Indians were granted British passports as the British Parliament only issued citizenship to 50,000 carefully selected households, covering only those well-off businessmen and professionals.



Those with less than minimum of 150,000 pounds in the banks would not be eligible to apply for British passports.

As BDTC cannot be passed down to next generation born after 1997, children will become stateless if their parents are only granted BOC (British Overseas Citizen) after 1997 according to British Nationality Order created by the House of Lord. One of my informants, Mr. S. questioned the arrangement, "What is the point of having BOCs for our children if Britain has already lost the sovereignty over Hong Kong after 1997? The right of abode in Hong Kong is not guaranteed by British passports but identity cards issued by the SAR Government." In other words, there is still no assurance for these stateless children. Even though these people are allowed to apply for Chinese Citizenship, it is difficult according to the Chinese racial rules as China has emphasized that only Hong Kong Chinese compatriots, holders of BNO or not, will be considered as Chinese nationals(White 1984: 228).

India, on the other hand, holds the attitude that Britain, the issuing country of BDTC, should be responsible for these people. India does not encourage dual nationalities. Those who hold passports of other countries are not allowed to carry Indian passports at the same time. However, many informants foresee that India is heading towards the direction of allowing dual nationalities in the near future as there is a growing population of India holding passports of more than one nation.

After all, it is neither a popular choice for Hong Kong Indian settlers to move back to India nor migrate to Britain, where they are afraid of experiencing a higher degree of discrimination. According to the survey done by The Overseas Resident Organization (an organization under CHIA which caters for the needs of the second and third generations Indians), only two out of the 400 BOC holders will consider the possibility of moving to England which is quite ironic to the over-reaction of Britain

towards minorities. Their applications for British passport were only an expression of their insecurity feelings towards Hong Kong

## **Well-known Indians and Communities**

Indian associations have a long history in helping the Indian communities, as well as contributing donations to the large societies in Hong Kong and mainland China. The donor's list of for those Indians who have donated their time and money towards good causes can be quite long. After settling in Hong Kong, Indians have established a sense of belonging to the territory and they would enjoy contributing to their residing community. For example, Sir Hormusjee Mody, a well-known broker in the early twentieth century, helped the construction of The University of Hong Kong. The well-known Parsi, Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy, funded numerous projects in India from the profits he made thanks to his outstanding entrepreneurial mind and his business connections with Jardine Fleming and with businesses in many other countries. Indeed, these Indians are well known among both minorities and local Chinese.

Harilela is another famous household name among not only Indians but also Chinese. The Harilela group is involved in hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, real estate and department store. The root of Harilela family could be traced back 64 years ago (Hinduism Today: Issue 94-11). Starting out as a tailor shop and finally becoming the authorized shop to make clothes for the English troops, Harilela's company became the largest mail order house in Hong Kong. Indeed, in addition to devoting time to business, the family also helped in the establishment of various associations under CHIA. Heri Harilela is often invited as the head or the honorary member of associations and his family has actively participated in various charitable



activities. The tradition of giving towards their living communities carries on among the Indian communities and Indian associations in Hong Kong.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Indian Associations in Hong Kong**

Through participating in activities organized by Indian associations in Hong Kong, I had the opportunities to observe how these activities were initiated and carried out. Moreover, I had a better understanding of the role of associations in enhancing the ethnic identity of the group as well as their ethnic relations with other communities. In the following, I would discuss activities carried out by Hong Kong India's Club, Hong Kong Indian Women's Association and Tamil Cultural Association.

#### **Why do people join Associations?**

When I raised the question, some said that they want to know more people through networking. Others said that they want to do something for their community. Through the co-ordination of an organization, it is easier to achieve certain goals, as the resources can be used more efficiently. Some members of associations hope their children will know about their own culture through participating activities. Indeed, most associations require their members to be Indians but some do not set such a requirement so as to attract the participation of those interested in Indian culture. People do join associations for their diverse reasons and many of them are indeed encouraged by friends who are active participants. As members of an association, they share the goals, or at least support the objectives of that organization. Such a commonality can create a sense of solidarity among a group of people.



## **The Council of Hong Kong Indian Associations (CHIA)**

The Council of Hong Kong Indian Association, which is known as CHIA, was established in 1973 and registered in July 1977. Several Indians came up with an idea to establish such a council so as to help Indians gain a wider recognition and acceptance in society and to make a greater impact on the community. They would like to see a central body consisting of senior members of the community who were willing to contribute their efforts for the benefit of the community at large. Other than these senior members, Indian organizations with substantial membership from all walks of life were invited to join the council so as to give a wider recognition and acceptance of the proposed central body. Mr. H. N Harilela agreed to be President of such a council and several honorary members were named. A meeting held at Hilton Hotel on 21 December 1972 was attended by a group of famous merchants at that time, including Mr. J. Mulchand, Mr. K. Sital, Mr. K.B. Rathi, and Mr. H.N. Harilela who was the one putting everything together and co-ordinating the project. On 7 February 1974, the Council held its first formal meeting at Hong Kong Club and decided on its main objectives (See Appendix II).

Today, there are altogether nine organizations which are under the umbrella of CHIA (Appendix III):

**The Indian Chamber of Commerce Hong Kong**  
**The India Association Hong Kong**  
**The Hindu Association**  
**The India Club**  
**The Hong Kong Indian Women's Club**  
**The Khalsa Diwan (for Sikhs)**  
**The Nav Bharat Club (sports)**  
**The Non-Resident Indian Organization**  
**The Overseas Indian Organization**

CHIA has been the official body within Hong Kong Indian communities during the past thirty years. Among all the associations under CHIA, the most recognised organization is The Indian Chamber of Commerce that was incorporated as a company limited in 1952. The chamber is the acknowledged body of the commercial sector of the Hong Kong Indian communities. It promotes trade and business between Hong Kong, India and other countries. It is also one of the five non-government organizations which is authorized to issue the Certificates of Origin. In Hong Kong, only five Chambers are allowed to issue these certificates which are required documents for export business and The Indian Chamber of Commerce is one of them. The Certificates of Origins is recognised in about 100 countries as equivalent to standard certificates. Regularly, it will hold conferences and luncheon meetings to discuss trade related issues.

Other than co-ordinating different associations under its umbrella, CHIA has its own programs as well. For example, it has functions including cocktails and dinners to welcome and bid farewell to the Commissioners and other visiting officials from India. Meetings with government officials are also held so that members will know more about government policies such as immigration rules. In addition, CHIA involves in charity such as raising money for the Flood Relief Funds of China and provides financial aids to Sir Ellis Kadoorie School for the extension of school facilities.

CHIA is also well recognised for its efforts in settling the passport issue for Hong Kong minorities. For example, Mr. H.N. Harilela, Mr. K. Sital, and Mr. Lachman Narain had taken trips to U.K. to lobby Members of the Parliament and high-level Cabinet Ministers to re-address the grievances of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong. Regular meetings were also carried out with relevant local officials.



A petition was submitted to both Hong Kong and British Governments for further review.

Although the passport issue is still under review and CHIA has so far achieved only partial success, it has aroused media sympathy. Besides, their effort has attracted the attention of general public towards policies related to ethnic minorities. And yet, more has to be done to achieve their goals; for example, they are requesting the grant of British nationalities for their children who do not have the right to inherit British nationalities from their parents after the handover.

The members of the Council tend to be the settlers who have lived in Hong Kong for generations to become the largest Indian community in the territory. With the wealth accumulated through generations, members of the Council seem to have more resources if compared with members of other newly formed associations. Most of the members of the council are indeed Sindhis. Sindhis have settled in Hong Kong in small groups before WWI, however, they did not come to Hong Kong in great number until the end of WWII. With their frequent public appearances in social and philanthropical activities, Sindhis are known among Indians as well as local Chinese. "Without Sindhis, Hong Kong will be less vibrant, and less wealthy in the full richness of life (White 1994: 123)."

Sindhis are often considered as too flashy and showy among Indian groups. They do enjoy and welcome the publicity both inside and outside the Indian communities as well as local and overseas. The two major magazines that are published on the life of Hong Kong Indian community, *Bharat Ratna: Life of the Overseas Indians* and *The Indians: The Voice of 10 Million Overseas Indians*, portray life of Indians in Hong Kong and overseas Indians' social activities.

Sindhis have a careful class distinction, which is determined by the old money from their families. Those living at Stubbs Road are considered as among the top cream whereas those residing in small apartments in Tsim Sha Tsui are recognised as lower-class Sindhis (White 1994: 123). A teenage Sindhis told me that less well-off Sindhis went to school like Delia but she and her other upper class Sindhis attend international School such as King George V or government sponsored institutes with good reputation, namely St Paul Coeducational School where French is taught.

CHIA often organizes grand and spectacular activities, just like the impression that Sindhis presents to other communities. The activities are show-like if compared with activities of other associations. This is perhaps related to the abundant resources they have and they inclined to show off their wealth. Usually, they conduct their functions in English so that non-Indians can participate. Very often, one can find Consulate members and Government officials in these activities.

CHIA holds various functions to celebrate Indian festivals. For example, during the month of Divali, approximately 16-17 functions are held by CHIA including children's tea party, youth party, balls and dinners. For the celebration of Divali (which is as important as Chinese New Year and marks the new crop year), dinners are served at five-star hotels and followed by shows. Dining tables are divided under the names of different Indian cities such as Bombay and Madras. The touch of India is found from decorations to background music and cuisine. Sometimes, less formal gatherings such as the celebration of Independence Day is held at prestigious clubs including Kowloon Club in a highly cultural and patriotic manner. The cultural aspect of CHIA can be best represented by the following



associations: India Association Hong Kong and Hong Kong Indian Women Association.

### **India Association Hong Kong**

The India Association Hong Kong was founded in 1948 and incorporated on 29 December 1965. Being a powerful association with a long history, it caters to the needs of local Indian communities (See Appendix IV). To be a life-time member, the membership fee is HK\$1300. Charitable walks including The Chest Community Walk are organized every year. Besides, it provides scholarships for students, for example, ten local students from a list offered by the Educational Department were given scholarships to further education this year. In addition, it runs several cultural events, for instance, a radio program sponsored by the club, is on air every Sunday afternoon. Each year, a Divali Ball is organized as a sell-out event. Meanwhile, it is also one of the few associations that celebrates Independence Day in August.

As the year 1998 was the Golden Jubilee of India's Independence and the first year for Hong Kong to become the Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China, Consul General of India, Mrs. Veena Sikri, posted a special message about Hong Kong Indians and India on local newspapers.

On 15 August 1998, the India Association stuck to its tradition and organized a show to celebrate India's Independence Day. Consul General, Mrs. Sikri and other prominent SAR Government officials were invited. In traditional saris and outfits, boys and girls energetically danced along with the Indian music. Indian dance is often the major program in all these shows and the song by Marina X Made

in India<sup>2</sup> is invariably played. That night was without exception. With words like “Made in India” playing repeatedly in the background, Children in T shirts danced accordingly. The “Indianness” of the performers was emphasized. The audience clapped their hands and sang along with the music. The performers led the audience to the climax. The song “Made in India” could place those who understand the lyrics into the collective identity that they share. At the same time, even those audiences who did not fully understand the lyrics could capture the flavour of the song through the repeating of the chorus, “Made in India”. A half-hour show gave the room a more relaxed atmosphere and warmed up the audience with the beat of the music.

At the time, when one walked into the room, one could believe that one was still in Hong Kong, for the room was packed with Indians in turbans, saris and other traditional Indian costumes. According to my informants, many dance movements were from the northern traditions but disco steps were added so that youngsters would be able to learn quickly before the performance. In the room, one would hear conversations conducted in English and different Indian languages but no Cantonese. One would feel like walking into a time and space in India. Perhaps, only the Chinese waiters inside would one remind that the celebration was actually taking place in Hong Kong. With sari flying in the room and the delectable mixture of smell in the air, the room was like an Indian festivity.

### **The Hong Kong Indian Women’s Club**

The club was founded in 1958. It registered as a charitable organization

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<sup>2</sup> The song which is categorized as soul and dance music was released in 1994.



exempted from tax. Most of its participants are married women. Indeed, its founder, Kamla Kapahi, was not an Indian herself but a Polish-Jewish who married a Punjabi man. Due to her enormous efforts, the club came into existence with a group of energetic ladies in 1958. Its chief goal is to carry out public and social works for the Indian community in Hong Kong. Through charitable works, members have raised funds to help poor, destitute Indian ladies and children in both Hong Kong and India and improve their living conditions (See Appendix V). Today, Kapahi has become a well-respected patron of the club. Throughout the years, the club has invited artists from overseas to perform for the Hong Kong community. Scholarships are offered to students every year and in 1997, six students were sponsored by the club to further their education. In addition to charitable functions, classes on various subjects are often provided for its members. For example, cooking class by Martin Yan, organized the committee members, has attracted many participants. Computer literate course is also offered to provide members with different exposures. Before festivals, gift wrapping and cake decoration classes are provided. Even dance classes are offered once in a while to keep the ladies on beat.

In an inauguration ceremony of a permanent plaque for a library donated by the club in 1998, an activity similar to the one organized by Hong Kong India Club for the celebration of Independence Day was held by the club. Before the ceremony, a program called "Little Wonder" was held at the house of the Consul General with the presence of Mrs. Betty Tung, the wife of Chief Executive Tung Chee-wah.

The program began with the recital of poems in French and Mandarin. As Sir Kadoorie School consists of students from various countries, not only Chinese but also Indian students participated in the recital. The recited poem was in

Mandarin about “The importance of having the national language, Mandarin, learned well in Hong Kong”. To give a beat to the whole poem, a wooden fish, a traditional instrument of Buddhist percussion, was used. It was followed by a French poem recited by two female students, which was about their vacation plans. The poem recital was then followed by a fashion show.

Students wearing beautiful saris, according to the traditions of different areas in India, participated in the show. During the whole program, all models were girls except the one who was starring as the Prince of the ancient time. When female students in costumes came down to the stage from the balcony, a couple acted as the Prince and the Princess of a royal family, strolling down the stairs and marched through the female performers, indicating their distinguished positions at the setting. Both the Prince and the Princess were beautiful in features with light colour skin. I believe that the male student was a Caucasian. It was also intriguing to find that the organizer had carefully chosen the cast to fit the historical background that upper class Indians were fond of light skin. Or was it just a coincidence that they had chosen students from various backgrounds in order to make the show more diverse. But then why was no Chinese student featured in this part of the program? The organizer said that the performers were chosen by the teachers so she had no ideas about it.

Gradually, more female students joined in the dance performance, which was a traditional wedding dance. Acting as relatives of the bride, they danced with handful of flower petals. At the end of the dance, they threw flowers to the audience. Finally, all performers came down to the stage and participated in a group dancing. The president of the club and Mrs. Tung were invited to join the



crowd. The dance initiated a ritual praying for wealth and health in the coming year.

At the end of the program, Mrs. Tung expressed in a closing speech that she was pleased to see students of different nationalities integrating so well in one school. The Consul General was also pleased to see Indian students who learnt so much about Mainland China as well as Hong Kong. The books and cassettes in the library donated by the club members would help students learn more about their own culture. "A taste of India" concluded the whole function with Indian cuisine served for guests. A traditional Indian music instrument and a gold plaque were also presented to Betty Tung as gifts.

Mrs. Tung, the wife of Chief Executive, is the Honorary Member of Hong Kong Indian Women Association. Indeed, in the past, Governors' wives were invited as a member of the club as well. As Mrs. Tung was a guest of this function, the usage of Mandarin in reciting poem was an obvious act to flatter. The poem was composed by students on the importance of learning Mandarin well in Hong Kong. When another French poem was recited, the content of the poem did not relate to any specific current issues but just a discussion between friends planning for vacation plans.

Each year, Hong Kong Indian Women's club also celebrates Christmas with children from a social welfare organization sponsored by the government. As one of the few Indian association with its own premises, the club can organize activities at the India's Club near King's Park; for example, a charitable activity for children was carried out there this year. Well before the beginning of the activity, members of the club had already collected gifts that were generously donated by a toy factory

owner. Each package includes candies, stationary, a radio and soft toys, nicely wrapped together.

After children from different centres seated, tutors of each centre chose representatives from each group to play games. Indeed, these children are from four different centres. Some of them are orphans and some are from families with problems. There were more than a hundred children there and their ages ranging from seven to sixteen years old. Most of them are Chinese except one who is an Indian teenager.

Tutors were the co-ordinators of the games and the program as a whole. The whole event was carried out in a bilingual atmosphere. The children seemed to be familiar with the rules of the games and the run-down of the program. For example, the participants were asked to list out the items of a picture in English, such as ginger bread man, Christmas bells, candles and other festive decorations, food, and animals. The winner of each group would come out to say "Merry Christmas" in English. The ladies from the Women's Club worked more on the logistic part of the whole program. They were responsible for delivering gifts after each event. Then the winners were presented with gifts, and they took photos with the club members.

After the program, the tutors asked the children if they were having a good time. Although I could hear some children saying that they enjoyed the program, some of them also screamed out that they did not like the program at all. I was not sure if they were being disobedient or simply that they did not enjoy the program. There was one Indian teenage boy who was in the crowd, immediately reacted to such a negative comment in perfect Cantonese, "Come on, don't act like this." I understand that children do not necessary answer what they really think.



Sometimes, they just simply want to rebel against the authority that adults impose on them. Perhaps, at that point, they found the program very boring since they had the same thing each year. Therefore, it was not a surprise to have negative feedback. However, I was quite disturbed to hear that a mature youngster in the crowd who tried to lighten up the atmosphere by stopping the others from giving comments. I immediately recalled that the children in front of me were the less unfortunate ones. I wondered if he felt the kindness of the people who organized the whole program so that he gave such a remark to encourage the organizers. Or, he was simply too much aware of his position--a teenage with family problems or simply without a family who could only receive the kindness from the others. He might realize that the program was no longer as entertaining as before, or it never was, he still wanted to support it.

The comments from the children made me think if yearly Christmas party is just an opportunity for the club members to demonstrate their kindness to the less unfortunate through organized activities. The social welfare centre and Hong Kong Indian Women's Club just occupy the children with a day of activities without paying attention to their interests. However, the following scene changed my mind from thinking this way.

Indeed, there were only a small group of Indian ladies, six of them, who participated in the activity. However, you could see them working very hard to coordinate the program. After acting as gift presenters, many helped serving Indian food to the children while the tutors were arranging for them to set dining tables prepared by the club. None of the ladies got a chance to sit down to try some snacks before the end of the whole program.

The climax of the program was "The Arrival of Santa Claus." One of the children was chosen to be the Santa Claus of the year. He wore the outfits of Santa while he presented gifts and candies to his friends. The children seemed to know who was acting as the Santa. The Santa sat at the stage and the children started to line up in front of him to pick up their Christmas gift. An Indian lady from the club helped the Santa deliver presents. The package was so large that some younger children had a hard time carrying them back to their seats. After receiving their gifts, children thanked the lady instead of the Santa. Many in fact knew that the club members were the ones who really gave out the gifts. However, the lady tried to divert them to thank the Santa instead. As she was the only one who could speak fluent Cantonese, she tried to assure the children that there was really a Santa in the world. She used the myth of Santa Claus rather than taking any credits in bringing the gifts to the children.

At the end of the program, each child not only received a package full of toys, but also a day of fun and a taste of Indian cuisine. The club members could finally relax and take a sip of Indian tea at the restaurant of The India Club.

### **The Tamil Cultural Association**

Founded in 1967, the Tamil Cultural Association is a regional association consisted of Southern Indians. With a membership up to 500, the association regularly provides activities for its members. The association only charges HK\$150 as endorsement fee and ten dollars as the joining fee. Picnics are organized for members and their families. In the past, cultural programs were offered, for example, Indian movies were shown at the former location of HMV in Tsim Sha Tsui. However, the association stopped importing Indian movies due to the



blooming of video industry in Hong Kong. Instead, they bring in well-known Indian performing groups, which cater to the needs of the Indian communities. Other than organizing cultural programs for its members, the association contributes to charity through collecting donations from members to help victims of natural disasters in India and China. They also help local people. So far, many charitable organizations such as The Mental Health Association and Orbis (The flying hospital for the blinds) have received gifts donated by the association.

In comparison with CHIA, Tamil Cultural Association seems to be a humble group with less resources. As there are fewer Tamils in Hong Kong, written materials on their history in Hong Kong are limited. According to the information provided by the association itself, many Tamils have been involved in gem business in the past but arrivals in recent decade are professionals in banking, computer and other sectors not related to gem.

The first time I participated in an activity organized by the association, I was asked repeatedly if I had joined the wrong tour when waiting outside of The Hong Kong Kowloon Hotel. That day, we had a picnic at the campsite of Pak Tam Chung. Compared with the above-mentioned activities provided by other associations, the tour was more like a gathering that was less formal or spectacular.

Indeed, it was very interesting for other members to find a Chinese girl joining the activity without being accompanied by a Tamil because most of the programs that day were conducted in Tamil. The members sang Tamil songs and played traditional games along the bus ride. For example, the first person recited a phrase and he had the right to pick the next person to continue by following his or her last word. If the person failed to do so, he or she would have to lead a song and the crowd would follow the song line by line. My informants said the songs mainly

came from movies or traditional songs that were once very popular in Tamil. After the bus ride started for ten minutes, everyone was singing on the bus.

At the campsite, members spent the first half of the day on indoor activities. Although the weather was not ideal for outdoor activities due to the rain, progress of the program was unaffected because the committee of the association had planned many group activities for the participants, including singing competitions and games like bingo. Many families had brought along food and drinks. After lunch, all were invited to play in skits. People were divided into four competing groups. One of the topics given was "Casting for a Movie" and participants were asked to act as a team of producers screening a star. One could see the audience attentively watching the presentation of each "actor". One could also hear the audience burst into uproarious laughter. One Chinese lady who went along with her Tamil husband commented that Tamils enjoy singing as they sang non-stop throughout the day. With much joyous singing, as well as plenty of games, the day passed quickly.

### **Other Associations**

There are other government sponsored or non-government organizations (NGO) trying to establish a sense of cohesion within the Indian migrants by organizing activities.

For example, Asian Migrant Centre is concerned with the various needs of migrants in Hong Kong. During the past few years, it has established workshops for the benefits of Hong Kong migrants of different ethnic backgrounds. It is believed that 1,300 Indians work as domestic helpers and many of them were employed by wealthy Indians. These domestic helpers are considered to need help from the centre because they are discriminated against by both upper class Indians as



well as Chinese in general. An organizer of the centre said these workers are not aware of their rights because their education level is not that high. Therefore, some of them are underpaid and exploited by their employers. Indian employers often justify the situation by saying that, "If they go back to India, they can only earn a few hundred Rupee (Rs)<sup>3</sup> in India so they are already a lot better off here in Hong Kong where they can earn a few thousands Hong Kong dollars."

Indian migrants usually come to the centre to join English classes. They can understand some English but their spoken English is not so good. Therefore, they have difficulties in finding jobs. Through the establishment of an association, the labourers can have a stronger voice when negotiating with their employers. They can even plan their own actions without receiving assistance from the centre. Hopefully, the association can assist newcomers from India to adjust to the life of Hong Kong and provide necessary information. Furthermore, the centre prepares a handbook in Hindi on the Rights of the Migrant Worker so as to provide more information to those seeking employment opportunities in Hong Kong.

The Indian Resources Group and Hong Kong Against Racial Discrimination work closely together to produce the film "Invisible Women" with a Chinese director, Tammy Cheung Hung, which is about Indian women in Hong Kong who are living in the shadow of discrimination in mid July 1999. According to James Joseph Keezhangatte, a volunteer with the Indian Domestic Association, about 50% of Indian domestic workers are underpaid, far less than the minimum wages of HK\$3,860 a month according to Hong Kong Labour Laws. Out of the three Indian women in the film, two of them are only paid only HK\$2,000 to HK\$2,500 a month. In long term, these associations hope to collaborate with Home Affairs Bureau,

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<sup>3</sup> The currency in India. 42.2 R -- US \$1

Labour Department and The Consulate General of India to help workers and employers through education (Daswani, *South China Morning Post*, 4/7/1999).

Another organizer, Mr. H, who is a member of Yau Tsim Wong District Broad. He helps to sponsor different activities for ethnic minorities. With his assistance, the Nationalities Fraternity is established for ethnic minorities in Hong Kong to provide them communal activities under the sponsorship of the SAR Government. It also offers the opportunity of cultural exchange between different communities.

To a certain extent, however, the fraternity and activities have limited participation because only those taking the initiatives to contact the council and Mr. H will be informed of the agenda of the activities. Therefore, to extend the network to a larger population, signs and banners have been posted up to gain a wider recognition. There is always a group of Indians participating in these programs but only a few other nationalities who join the activities. Therefore, it is difficult for Indians to really interact with other groups. For example, some Indians mistook an annual dinner held at a Chinese restaurant for a Divali ball because most performers were Indians. In addition, many performers greeted the audiences "Happy Divali" after each performance. On behalf of the Consulate General of India, a Counsel came to greet the participants as well. Except a few tables with government representatives, the Chinese restaurant was crowded with Indians. Therefore the program still has room to extend its network so that more nationalities can enjoy services provided by the fraternity.



## Concluding Remarks

Through participating in activities organized by Indian associations, we can see that Indians manifest a stronger ethnic identity in their activities and it is rather difficult for a Hong Kong Chinese to step into their social space. The performances allow not only the performers but also the audiences to come to the climax, a social space that separates the participants from the outside world through the injection of cultural elements into different programs.

With the help of satellite TV and videotapes, many audiences have better knowledge about recent productions of Indian media. Songs that are played on the stage as are often popular throughout India. In skits, performers play famous movie scenes, which are collective memory of many members of the audience. Therefore, it is easier for them to have a sense of attachment towards the show. It just fits with the idea of mediascape offered by Appadurai that media coverage can be across boundary. The media presentation can arouse a collective identity among audiences and also a call of national consciousness. Songs such as "Made in India" repeatedly emphasizes the identity of these participants who are of Indian origin.

The inclusion of dance performance is also a key element for every show and activity. For example, at the preparation stage of the Christmas party jointly organized by the Hong Kong Indian Women's Club and the social welfare centre, one Indian lady suggested that her daughters could dance for all the children, saying that it would be something interesting and fascinating for the children to see and the whole show could be more accented with "Indianness". She believed that such arrangement would enhance cultural understanding between Chinese and Indians. Although the idea was not realized, it was an attempt by local Indians to teach Chinese children more about Indian culture.

Although dance is a key feature of each performance, it is not necessary to be strictly traditional. Improvisation is always a key to make the show more diverse and distinctive with the exciting combination of people, costumes, decorations and locations. "Made in India" is never a boring song even though it is played many times at different occasions because the dance gives the song a unique touch. Besides, it is an invention based on traditions by adding disco steps to the dance.

One of the characteristics of all these activities is that many participants tend to wear traditional costumes when attending these cultural programs, especially the ladies. Men may still wear their casual and western clothes. However, women are more likely to wear the traditional outfits. Some say that they feel more festive if they wear saris for special occasions. They refrain from wearing it in daily life because it is difficult to take care of children and deal with daily chores in saris. Besides, some of them would like to save their beautiful outfits for important occasions because many have theirs handmade in India, which are usually made of luxurious silk or linen with golden thread lining or embroidery. They use their costumes to create a collective identity for special occasions.

On these occasions, networking seems to be a major function and it is not surprising to find the same informants participate in various functions under the umbrella of CHIA. It indicates that many participants do have multiple memberships in various associations under the umbrella. Besides, members of the same family may hold positions on the board of several associations. For example, well-known Indians of the Harilela family have been invited to join various associations.

In the case of Tamils, they seem to find their cohesion through participating in collective activities. Tamils usually organize gatherings for their own entertainment but seldom put on public shows. A drama festival is only organized once in a while



for both their entertainment and the celebration of festival. They can freely express themselves through these cultural programs conducted in their own language. The association is a mobilizing force that helps them establish cohesion among themselves. The setting of the activities is more for the taste of Tamils, but not necessary for others – a feature quite different from these activities organized by CHIA.

Other than the differences in the nature of activities, the charges are set at different levels. For example, the membership fee of The India Association costs ten times more than The Tamil Cultural Association. Meanwhile, a ball organized by India Association will charge around 1000 HK Dollars per head. This will exclude the participation of many people, even though the organizers claim that all are welcome. Sometimes, the people on the invitation list are limited to certain groups of people, such as the prominent Indian families in Hong Kong.

We can see that Hong Kong Indians have a wide variety of organized events. However, these activities are carried out a few times a year only due to the limited resources of the associations. It is interesting to know how Hong Kong Indians present themselves in daily life when they are among the general public. Besides, it is intriguing to know how Indians interact with Chinese, the majority population in Hong Kong. After all, do they find they belong in Hong Kong? After interviewing with around twenty key participants of associations including committee members and ordinary members, I would like to share some of my informants' opinions about Hong Kong, Hong Kong Indians and Hong Kong Chinese.

## Chapter 4

### The Sense of Belonging and Ethnic Identity

Home is always a term which has the implication of a “sense of belonging”, “connection”, and “relation” that a person has towards a place or somewhere one finds himself or herself comfortable at or attach to. For the 28,000 Indians in Hong Kong, where is their home? Do they find they belong in Hong Kong? Do they identify with the territory? In this chapter, I would like to look at how Hong Kong Indians conceive their relationship with the territory and the Hong Kong Chinese. First of all, I will try to examine the subjective experience of Indians towards the concept of home and their sense of belonging. As subjective experience does not account for all, ethnic markers are considered for they sometimes serve as the objective limitations in affecting boundary drawing between ethnic groups. However, they can also be ignored or emphasized according to situations. To be specific, I would like to look at the informants’ opinions towards the following categories: language, caste, religion, and marriage. Their opinions can reflect their positions as these ethnic markers can help identify the variances between different ethnic groups. Through collecting opinions of my informants, I hope to get a clear picture of how these categories can identify the ethnic boundary of ethnic groups. I will also apply Barth’s theory on the importance of cultural elements in the process of boundary drawing.



## Sense of Belonging

Many Indians regard Hong Kong as their home, especially those who were born here and those who have resided in Hong Kong for a long period of time. It is not unusual to hear the following line "I think I am definitely a Hong Kong person because I was born here," "I can never imagine myself moving out of Hong Kong," or "I am with you and you are with me, we are all at the same place." Some of them even think that they cannot imagine themselves residing in India. They seem to have a stronger sense of belonging towards Hong Kong than some Hong Kong people do. Facing current economic recession of Hong Kong, many still feel strongly about living in the territory, even though they do not think that the economy will recover soon.

Perhaps many Indians do not have a choice. Or they do not find it necessary to move away from Hong Kong. Although half a million middle-class Hong Kong Chinese left the city since the Joint Declaration, there was not a significant decrease in the number of Indians in Hong Kong. Indeed, a good number of Indians have applied for British passports, probably because of their long-term relationship with Britain. One of my informants said that he was curious about England because he has learnt much about the country from books after receiving a colonial education. He believed that Hong Kong is a place that he likes because of its past colonial system, just like England. He was pleased to have an opportunity to realize his dream thanks to his company, which offers overseas positions. We can see that some Indians have mixed feelings towards England. They take a somewhat love and hate relationship towards British rule, a sentiment that Hong Kong Chinese can identify with. This is one reason why so many Indians decide to choose Britain for migration. In addition, after Britain promised 50,000 households could have British

passports, many Indians applied for it as an insurance though they do not intend to use it.

Of course, the sentiments could only be a typical experience of settlers who regard Hong Kong as a place for long-term residency. The feeling of uncertainty urged them to apply for passports of other countries for security. Sojourners, however, may think differently. If Hong Kong becomes a place where they cannot reside, they can go back to India. My informant, Paul, has resided in Hong Kong for ten years and he has mixed feelings towards both India and Hong Kong.

I was brought up in India, so I do miss my hometown and everything. Of course, when I go back to India for holiday, I will enjoy myself. And at the same time, I miss Hong Kong also. So, at this stage, the working part of my life, I still prefer to be in Hong Kong. I think after I retire, I will prefer to go back to India to try to help people with my experience.

It is not saying that a sojourner or a settler definitely has a certain kind of experience. However, their experience does indirectly affect their perception towards the territory and Hong Kong Chinese. Indeed, between the sojourners and the settlers, there are certain differences, which affect their relationship between one another and also their interactions with Hong Kong Chinese.

### **The differences between sojourners and settlers**

In the past, there were also a lot of businessmen who came to Hong Kong for business opportunities. They did not expect to stay in Hong Kong for such a long period of time. However, the growth of their business urged them to settle in Hong Kong.

On the other hand, the group that arrived during the 80s and 90s considered Hong Kong as a place for job opportunities but not necessarily for long-term



residence. They think that they are very different from the settlers who have lived in Hong Kong for such a long time. For them, settlers are those who have never lived in India except for vacations.

My informant, Mr. R, once said,

These settlers cannot live in India. They will go crazy if they do. Where will they go (if they cannot live in Hong Kong anymore)? Definitely not India. They know they cannot go back. India has changed. These people left it way back. Although they claim to know India, they really don't know. They are just like people from Hong Kong. What can they do there anyway? The Indian settlers in Hong Kong are flashy and business oriented like Hong Kong people. They are less Indian, more Chinese. We are different in both likes and dislikes. On the other hand, people like us can never be a total Hong Kong person. People like me will stay in Hong Kong and have activities with our own type of people rather than mixing with the local population.

From the comment above, we can see that, on the one hand, Mr. R simply segregates Hong Kong Indian settlers from the rest of Indians, either in Hong Kong or in India. He considers these Indian settlers to be like Hong Kong Chinese, a different group of people from sojourners. He has denied the "Indianness" of these settlers in Hong Kong, as they have left India for such a long time. Settlers cannot relate to India because things have changed there. On the other hand, Mr. R brings up the point that the other people, the so-called sojourners, can never be an entirely Hong Kong person. Therefore, sojourners can only mix with their own people but not Chinese people. Neither do they attempt to establish long term relationship with Chinese. Mr. R insists that the boundary drawing between the settlers and sojourners is very distinctive, just as obvious as the one, between Hong Kong Chinese and sojourners.

Indeed, in Mr. R's statement, he places these settlers into such an awkward position. Due to changes to India in recent years, Hong Kong Indian settlers cannot return to India or are not willing to live in India. India seems to be the last place

that they want to reside. And, India is probably a place that they are no longer familiar with. Therefore, they cannot adjust to the life of India. Whether the Indian settlers in Hong Kong take an active or passive role in making the decision of about going back, it will be a difficult time for them to get used to the life in India. Even though they wish to move back to India, or simply Hong Kong has forced them to go away, Indian settlers in Hong Kong will have a hard time to fit in the life of India.

According to the opinions of the sojourners, the interpretation of “Indianness” is very different between the sojourners and the settlers. In the negotiation of ethnic relations, we can see that both groups have put themselves into a different category from one another. The settlers consider themselves different from Hong Kong Chinese and they have a special feeling for India. They may not feel comfortable to reside in India, England, or simply out of Hong Kong. However, the line seems to be redrawn by the sojourners who claim that Indian settlers do not belong to their category. It becomes very ironic for Indian settlers who try to maintain their ethnic identity as Indians by participating in associations. Some of them try to expose their children to Indian culture through association activities. The idea of “Indianness” has thus become a very interesting subject, which serves only as a collective memory for association members and organizers.

And yet, Indian settlers in Hong Kong identify closely with Hong Kong for they have resided in Hong Kong for so long. At the same time, they come across problems on identities, as they are not politically recognised by various governments. Their relationships with Hong Kong Chinese remain ambiguous. It is a combination of sentiments towards the territory, the people and the time that they have spent there so far.



## **Hong Kong Indians Vs Hong Kong Chinese**

As a researcher, I have been asked repeatedly by Hong Kong Chinese if Indians do smell. Local Chinese have the impression that Indians, or the so-called “Ah Chai” and “Ah Singh”, are dirty and cheap. This is a negative impression that many Hong Kong Chinese have towards the Indians.

On the contrary, it is interesting to know the impression of Indians towards local Chinese. Indeed, Indians do not have specific names for Chinese except “Chin”, which is commonly used to refer to Chinese. Indians often have the impression that Hong Kong people, who are very busy and fully occupied, they do not like things to come into their way or simply do not want to be interrupted when walking or talking. Brisk and busy are the common adjectives that Indians may use to describe Hong Kong Chinese. Many Indians also think that Hong Kong people stick to their own circles and exclude others. One informant said, “it is good in some ways. We live together and do business together. We don’t interact together. We do not have the chance to hug each other like westerners. But, at least, we won’t be treated like the Chinese in Indonesia. Chinese are more interested in their own cultures than the others.”

And yet, the Indians do feel that they are segregated from local Chinese. My informants explained that the segregation might be caused by differences in living styles and habits. In the eyes of Indians, a typical Hong Kong Chinese is portrayed as a self-centred person who overly cares about oneself but not other people.

Many informants recalled that when they first came to Hong Kong, they found the relationship between people unbearable and it took a long time for them to

learn to get to know their neighbours. One of my informants was dissatisfied to find out that I did not know my neighbours well. I tried to argue with him by pointing out urban settlers refrain from establishing some easy relations with others. However, my informant immediately told me that even in Delhi<sup>4</sup>, his hometown, it would be absurd for neighbours to be unfamiliar with one another. He said that sojourners from India find themselves forced to interact with one another for they have no interaction with Chinese.

Even though my informants feel that they are segregated from local Chinese, in general, they do not think that they are racially discriminated. However, they did share some unpleasant encounters with Hong Kong Chinese.

My informant, Ms. U, recalled that when she returned from a trip to India, she had three suitcases, which were impossible for her to carry all at one time. As her building had no lift, she had to carry the suitcases upstairs by herself. Without any security guard around, she could find nobody to look after her suitcases. Therefore, she decided to move the first two up and came back for the third later. Unfortunately, when she came back, she could not find her baggage. Though such incident might happen to a Chinese girl as well, she was frustrated her Chinese neighbours living in the same building were unwilling to offer a helping hand.

As pointed out by Ms. U, the same incident can happen to anybody. However, some Indians who come across some unpleasant experiences may put the blame on their being different from Hong Kong Chinese, even though they may not be aware of this tendency. Indians may expect that they would be treated differently if they were Hong Kong Chinese. Even though many of them choose to identify with "Hong Kongnese" as they have lived in the territory for all their lives,

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<sup>4</sup> The capital of India and the third most highly populated city in the country.



they know they will be treated differently. Anyway, they cannot identify with other places except Hong Kong.

Mr. S has such an experience when trying to get a cab:

A taxi driver will probably pick up somebody else before me. If you speak everything in Cantonese, everything disappears. But I do not consider it discrimination, well, or I will say I will not lose sleep over it. After all, there is no major hardship. Just like I walk in to the restaurant but I don't get a seat because of my skin color.

Mr. R has provided the following example:

If someone is rude to me, I will be rude to him too. That's Hong Kong. One good thing about this place is that taxi driver is rude to you, he is rude to British, and rude to Chinese, or rude to Indians. He is basically rude to everybody. After many years, you will know that they will do it to the Chinese also. It not because you are Indians or not. Of course, in many cases, I know that I am an Indian and I am being discriminated against. If I am in India and a Chinese comes to me, I will say get lost.

It is not fair to say that all Indians have negative experiences in Hong Kong. There are many Indians who say they interact well with local people, especially those CHIA settlers that I interviewed. The above example given by Mr. S also shows that it is also up to the person himself to consider if the incident is a case of discrimination.

In Hong Kong, there are still no laws on racial discrimination. The establishment of Equal Opportunities Commission Hong Kong in 1996 aims to increase the awareness of the public towards sex, disability and family status discrimination through education and researches. Home Affairs Department has also funded numerous projects to encourage community participation of promoting "Equal Opportunities" and 25 organizations have applied for the fund.

During the interviews, I find that sojourners are more at ease to comment on Hong Kong Chinese than settlers. Perhaps, the Indian settlers do not want to give an impression that they do not feel comfortable when interacting with local Chinese. It is a sensitive issue to discuss as it is the place where they have settled. Or they simply think that as a minority group, they are not in a favourable position to comment on the majority group. Sojourners, in the contrary, are more open to giving comments about Hong Kong people. As they have set their minds to stay in the territory for a limited period of time, they do not have to establish a long-term relationship with the local people. Therefore, they express their likes or dislikes freely. Perhaps, it might also be true that Indian settlers in Hong Kong have accepted the place as it is and the people as the way they are as they are accustomed to Hong Kong culture while recent arrivals need to take time to adjust to the life in Hong Kong.

From the following discussion about communication difficulties of my informants, we can learn more about the physical problems they come across in their living environment.

## **Language**

Many of my informants attended a dance performance staged by Daksha Sheth Dance Company which incorporated Indian Martial Arts and contemporary dance into a performance under the title "Search for My Tongue" during its first visit to Hong Kong.

The performance unfolds the difficulty faced by many Indians who undergo the process of searching for identity. Many Indians speak English as well as their local dialects. However, as a means of communication, English is more widely



spoken than local dialects even when two Indians communicate with one another. The same situation happens with overseas Indians and Hong Kong Indians in Hong Kong. Indians even communicate with their children in English. As a result, the second generation of these migrants has little exposure to the Indian dialect. When they go back to India, they find that they are unfamiliar with both Indian dialects and culture. Therefore they feel alienated when living in India, just like a stranger.

The most memorable scene of the show is when two male dancers mingled together on the floor to imitate the image of having two tongues in the same mouth. Such a movement gives the audiences a devastating feeling. The two artists tried to separate but they could not as they were closely locked together, as they were two tongues in the same mouth. The dance metaphors the struggle of people choosing between the local dialect and English, a common problem among many Indians who have been caught between two cultures: the traditional and the modern. To dissolve such a tension, there was a quest for identity and language. All the performers in the show were lost in their search for identities at the verge of modernity. And yet, they could not fully accommodate themselves to the situation that they were in.

Many Hong Kong Indians choose the territory for migration because of its bilingual background. Furthermore, they have to deal with a more complex situation than those who are residing in India. Other than English and their local dialects, they need to learn Cantonese, which is the language spoken by the majority of local population. The identity issue becomes more complicated.

Perhaps, the cultural backgrounds for Indians to learn several languages put them in a better position to learn Cantonese. Or, they have to know Cantonese to do business in Hong Kong. Although some Indians who do not know Cantonese at all, you can find a group with perfect Cantonese, especially those who have settled in

Hong Kong. They speak such good Cantonese that if you close your eyes, you will mistake them for Hong Kong Chinese.

There are many Hong Kong Indians who do not speak Cantonese for they think that English is widely spoken in the territory. Therefore, there is no need to learn Cantonese. They can maintain good relationships with Hong Kong Chinese, so they have little motivation to learn the local language.

On the other hand, my other informants who are sojourners complain that it is difficult for them to be included in Chinese communities because of language barrier. When I asked Mrs. N if she felt alienated when living in Hong Kong, she simply answered, "I can't even make an attempt to be included into the Chinese community. Because even to make an attempt, I need to communicate, to link with them." Her answer indicated that I had asked an inappropriate question as the inquiry is based on the assumption that without the language proficiency, she would still be able to communicate well with local Chinese. Meanwhile, Mrs. N supplemented her answer by giving an example.

Mrs. N explained that she followed her husband to work in different countries for a period of time and Hong Kong is the city where she cannot reach out to the general population. She pointed out that when she lived in Malaysia, her interaction with the local people allowed her to learn the local dialect. In Hong Kong, the interaction is so little that she can hardly pick up the language. It is a vicious cycle: As she does not know the language, the interaction is further limited. Since she may stay in Hong Kong in the next five or six years, she hopes that she can break through the invisible wall and get to know the people.

For those informants who do not know the language, they assume that fluency in Cantonese can help them break through this segregation. Some of my



informants say that language plays a key role for Indians to integrate with Hong Kong Chinese. In other words, there is almost no social interaction with the Cantonese if you do not know the language. Out of my thirty informants, around twenty of them cannot communicate fluently in Cantonese. It is because some old Indians do not speak Cantonese whereas children studying in international school may not know Cantonese for they have little exposure to the language.

When Indians interact with Hong Kong Chinese, even though some of them do not speak the language, they can guess the general attitude of the speaker through intonation. For example, Mr. K once said, "I don't think that the people (Chinese) intend to do so. When they are speaking Cantonese, they are speaking in the accent like that, 'Ah Yah'. Even the people do not mean it, for a stranger or a person like me, even you don't understand anything they say, you can hear from the tone." Or, in a much positive way, as an Indian settler in Hong Kong who is elected as representative of the local Chinese community, told me that even though he does not know much Cantonese other than a few greeting words, language is always something that you can understand easily. With the assistance of his Hong Kong staffs, as well as his long residency in the territory, he is confident that he knows Hong Kong well. With his cultural knowledge, he can deal with problems and complaints raised by citizens who come to ask for help.

Language may not be the only factor contributing to such segregation between two groups. My informant, Mr. P, who had resided in Hong Kong for more than five years since 1982, when taking a bus from Pokfulam to Central, the seat next to him would never be occupied. As he was trying to learn Mandarin at that time, he always had Chinese newspaper in hands. Unfortunately, his newspaper did not give him any advantages. Consequently, he became more

conscious of his own image including body odour and outfits. Even though he did make sure that he was well accepted at a professional level, the situation did not change.

It seems that in the case of Mr. P, something other than language is the barrier between two groups. His newspaper in his hands broke his illusion that he could be well accepted by Hong Kong Chinese. As a Consul who had been to various places, he found that it is difficult to understand Hong Kong. Somehow he cannot find himself be accepted by local Chinese. He doubted the truth of the assumption that Indians share a long history with Hong Kong so they have a close relationship with Hong Kong Chinese.

Language is not necessarily an excuse for two groups to segregate from one another. Communication means more than sharing a language. Segregation can still exist between two groups even though they share the same language. However, with the assistance of body language, intonation, and other subtle cues, communicators of both sides can pick up messages easily. However, an increased length of residency at a certain place can help the process of communication because of the sharing of cultural knowledge. And yet, we can see that in the case of Hong Kong, English can be considered as a common language between Chinese and Indians, but they may still have communication problems.

Some of my informants say that they choose to speak Cantonese at certain occasions in order to be considered as locals. In Hong Kong, English is used in the employment sector and academic settings, while Cantonese serves the needs of the community in everyday pursuits. The usage of Cantonese allows informants to have access to immediate needs, with instrumental values during encounters with the local Cantonese speaking community (Pannu 1998: 236). Consequently, they are



less likely to be cheated and treated differently by Chinese. For example, my informant said that when he speaks Cantonese to a taxi driver, the driver is more likely to understand him and less likely to choose a longer route in front of an “old Hong Kongnese”, who knows his or her way in the city. This incident shows how Indians skilfully use the language to help themselves get around in the city. They will exert certain elements of ethnicity to enjoy certain benefits in daily lives.

In spite of the fact that many informants regard language as a barrier of integration into the majority population, some informants try to think more positively about the problems of language barrier and integration.

An informant, Mrs. R, thought that if she was treated badly by Hong Kong Chinese, she might blame herself for not knowing the language of the place where she resided. She said that there was one time that people treated her so badly that her aunt from India was surprised to find that she could manage to live in Hong Kong for such a long time. Mrs. R thought that sometimes shopkeepers told her, “Go, go, go” simply because they did not know how to communicate with her. She guessed that they did not have time to deal with her by using hands and gestures or they did not have the communication skills to do so. Therefore, she concluded, “Why do I need to go down to that level to get myself upset?” She believed that it was more important to know why she was treated badly, rather than blaming the Chinese for everything she came across in life. However, she found changes during her sixteen-year residency in Hong Kong. For example, the local people have changed from self-centred to become more considerate. After all, Hong Kong is not a difficult place for her to live in. She thought that she would miss Hong Kong when she had to return to India.

Another informant, Ms K, decided to learn Mandarin so as to widen her career prospect and to break through the language barrier with Chinese. She knew that if she wanted to get a job in Hong Kong, she needed to know not only Cantonese but also Mandarin. Another informant, Mr. C, shares Ms. K's vision. Although he is going to stay in Hong Kong for a few years, he tries to pick up the language by taking classes and learning from his colleagues. After the termination of his contract, he will move back to India. In order to make his experience in Hong Kong more interesting, he decided to pick up the local language as he thought that language barrier could create much cultural misunderstanding between people. To illustrate the language problem that he has, he has given me an example of his own.

When Mr. C first arrived in the territory, he went to visit a friend living on Hong Kong Island. His friend asked him to wait in front of Sogo, a Japanese department store on Hong Kong Island. After getting off from the bus, he found himself in front of Sogo but he could not locate its exit. Therefore, he asked a passer-by but the person walked past him without giving an answer. He tried again and that person was at a loss for words before responding in Chinese, "*mou-a* (nothing)." At first, he thought that Hong Kong people were rude. Later, however, he realised that it was a communication problem. The two passer-bys that did not speak any English were simply trying to get out of the embarrassing situations. He thought it was his fault because he could not remember the Chinese name of Sogo. Therefore, he decided to learn Cantonese so as to understand people around him.

Throughout the interview, Mr. C repeatedly tried to talk to me in Cantonese. It was also very interesting to observe his conversations with his colleagues in Cantonese. The way he spoke might be amusing due to his awkward intonation and over-carefulness in pronunciation, and yet, his attempt did make the interactions



between himself and his colleagues become less serious. Perhaps, it is one way for Mr. C to dissolve the tension between his staff and himself.

To a certain extent, Mr. C tries to eliminate the power of language. At least, his colleagues did not need to struggle with English when communicating with him, whereas, he can learn Cantonese from them. Indeed, his working environment is quite secluded, as most of his colleagues are local Chinese staff. However, he is simply at ease about the situation. He said that he is pleased to find his Chinese colleagues using their mother tongue.

After this interview, I had another appointment with Mr. L, a colleague of Mr. C who belongs at another section. He also plans to stay in the territory for the next few years. I noticed that the relationship between Mr. L and his colleagues seems to be less lively if compared with the case of Mr. C. Of course, the relationship is subject to many variables including power structure and characters of people involved. And yet, I find that language, as a means of communication, can affect relations between people. I can imagine that it is difficult for a local staff to communicate with Mr. L, an Indian manager who speaks English with a strong accent. Meanwhile the staff have to struggle with their second language, English, in order to communicate with him.

Language, to a certain extent, can serve as an ethnic marker of different language groups. In daily life, it is possible to overcome a language barrier by communicating through expressions, actions, and other cues, which can help the interpretation of people's behavior. As it is a dialectical relationship between both sides of the communication, it is not realistic for two people to communicate only in cues without actually understanding the language.

Gibbons, in his study of the choice of language in communication, cites “pragmatic constraints” to explain the choice of a language and its relation to the linguistic competence of the participants in an interaction. In other words, it will be pointless to choose a language that the interlocutor cannot understand. He also maintains that it is not the time and place that affect the language choice but also related to the psychological state of the individual and the associated social situation at a given time or place that creates the need to choose a particular code (Gibbons 1983, 1987).

However, the common language is not an answer to all questions. It is also important to have a mutual understanding of each other’s interaction pattern. After all, there are so many variables that can affect the communication process, which will in turn affect the relationship between people in a long run.

## **Caste**

Although the caste system has been a very distinctive practice in Indian culture, it is not clear if the system exists among Hong Kong Indian communities. The system has multiple implications and a complicated historical background. In Malaysia, caste consciousness is more prevalent among the older generations. It is brought to attention only on matters of commensality and marriage (Rajoo 1984: 215). Besides, it is an item hard to verify through interviews because some informants may feel uncomfortable to discuss the topic. Nevertheless, I have tried to collect some informants’ opinions and their attitude towards the system.

It is very interesting to find that many of my informants claim that caste is no longer popular among Hong Kong Indian communities. They explain that the new generations in India do not take it as seriously as their older generations. Therefore,



the practice is even less significant in Hong Kong. Some of my informants also add a line to supplement their comments: "We are Brahmins, but the system is no longer practised"<sup>5</sup>. From this comment, I find that caste is still a concern of my informants. According to the categorization of Hinduism, Brahmins have high status and prestige. Therefore, they do not mind to disclose their ranking in the system. With such an awareness, I suspect that the caste system is still alive, but in a more subtle way.

Some informants declare that they have no idea about the caste system and its practice in Hong Kong. Some simply think that I am more pointing towards the direction of ethnic relationship between Chinese and Indians or other Muslims and Hindus. The concern seems to shift from the traditional caste divisions in India to a wider context since Hong Kong has other nationalities as well. As Hindu is not the majority group, the practice of caste in Hong Kong where the migrants are Buddhists and followers of Chinese popular religions has shifted its focus too.

An international city like Hong Kong has a heterogeneous population. I can see that the concept of caste is not as concrete as in the past although it still exists. One of my informants, Mr K, claimed that the practice is no longer significant in India, he mentioned that he was surprised to find many Hong Kong Indians are willing to perform degrading jobs. To a certain extent, job differentiation of the caste system still persists in the minds of some Indians. However, the practice has been less emphasized in Hong Kong. Perhaps, mentioned by Mr. K, people nowadays are more concerned with the people's occupations rather than the actual caste people belong to. The original vertical hierarchy of caste has broken down

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<sup>5</sup> Brahmins are priests who are arbiters of the right and wrong in religious matters. Kshatriyas is the next level which consists of soldiers and administrators. Vaisyas belong to the artisan and the commercial class whereas farmers and peasants are considered as Sudras, the lowest class of all four levels. In addition, there is a group of people who are considered as untouchables and they are basically casteless in the system. They usually perform degrading jobs. However, the system is not as rigid as before.

into the subordinate classes based on economic and political power (Bailey, 1960). Hong Kong Indians are more concerned with status and prestige rather than the fixed division decided by birth.

After moving to Hong Kong, many Indians do enjoy a higher level of economic mobility, though they have gone through radical changes in their lives if compared with their fellow countrymen in India. They have to go through tremendous adjustments so as to settle down in the territory. Besides, as the Indian population is small, grouping is based on religions or region where people come from rather than caste system. Therefore, overseas Indians are more flexible in looking at the concept of caste.

However, class distinction can be conceived as another form of caste system because the segregation remains strong between different classes and different grouping of Indians, such as the differences between settlers and sojourners. The practice of caste may have diffuse into another form. For example, some sojourners say that local Indians are more traditional than the new arrivals from India. The settlers have kept their traditional values and beliefs well, so as to keep themselves from being engulfed by the culture of the majority population at a foreign area. In contrast, new arrivals are more likely to accept the changes that have taken place in India because they have gradually experienced the changes. Therefore, sojourners and settlers have different perceptions when they discuss issues related to India.

## **Marriages**

In the past, there was a belief that Indians living abroad for a period of time would become the cream of the marriage market in India. In Hong Kong, owing to a rise in Indian population, there is an increase in marriages taking place between



Hong Kong Indians. Intermarriages between Hong Kong Chinese and Indians remain limited. Hong Kong Indian men are also more likely to get married with girls from India, whereas Hong Kong Indian girls are less likely to go back to India for marriages. If Indian men are likely to find their partners in India under the setting of arranged marriages, what is the prospect of Hong Kong Indian girls, who have been westernized by receiving colonial education?

Although ethnic groups vary in their marriage practices, females of different cultures can still identify the pressure imposed by gender roles of their societies. Compared with Chinese girls in Hong Kong, Indian girls get married relatively early. Young Indian girls often marry in late teens or early twenties. Many of them quit schools after Form 5 and start working. After that, girls look for marriage partners, or their families find them husbands. However, due to media influence, love matching of western culture seems to be an attractive way to find another half rather than getting married with a stranger.

For most of my young female informants, especially those at high school age, marriage seems to be something that is very far away from them, or something that they have not yet considered. My high-school informants seem to have accepted the idea of arranged marriages. When I ask them to make a decision on behalf of a fictive Indian girl who falls in love with someone that her parents dislike, many replied that the girl should respect the opinions of her parents who know the best and will find her the most suitable partner. Their answers reflect their obedience towards their parents' decisions. Perhaps, it is too early to ask them to make a decision on marriage until they have encountered realistic situation themselves. They may meet someone at workplace that may not be an ideal husband in the eyes

of their parents. To a certain extent, such a hypothetical situation can reflect their position on the issue.

My university informants seem to have a better picture about their future plan. They notice that many young Hong Kong Indian girls get married early and leave schools after Form 5. For themselves, they think that education, rather than a husband, is one way to cultivate future security. Therefore, they treasure the time at school, which equips them with knowledge needed in society. For example, some informants notice education standards have risen a lot in India and many girls are highly educated. In order to increase their own bargaining power, they want to upgrade themselves to attain a high education level.

For example, Ms. S, an undergraduate in education at a Hong Kong University, where English is the medium of instruction, wants to get herself ready for the real world. She emphasizes the importance of education. She thinks that if she wants to compete with people in India when she goes back in one day, she needs to develop more talents for self-advancement. She is not sure why so many Indian girls give up their chances of getting further education even though they are eligible to do so. She thinks, perhaps, these girls just want to follow others' footsteps or their parents' advises, as they have not thought about their own future.

The case of Ms. B, a high school student provides another reasons to explain why so many Indian girls quit school after Form Five. She said some people believe that matriculate level of Hong Kong is not useful because it is only a period to prepare students for entrance examinations of universities. Since she has no intention to receive tertiary education, there is no need for her to attend Form Six even though she is likely to get a place to study Form Five in her own school. She claims that she prefers working at the real world for a few years to get more



experiences rather than wasting her time in school to learn nothing. In many cases, my younger informants will only take what is in front of them. If they have a chance to continue their education, they will. If not, they do not mind working at an early age because they can help their parents' business.

As many Indian girls start working early, they also tend to settle down at a fairly young age. Family is very important to them. Indian girls usually think that arranged marriages are better than love marriages. They have the preconception that arranged marriages have a better chance to succeed because the couple does not know much about each other. Therefore, it is interesting for both sides to find out more about each other after they get married. They have less expectation towards each other because they do not know one another very well in the past. Therefore, they are more likely to compromise rather than standing firm of what they believe in. At least, there will be less complaint about how their other half have treated them differently after getting married.

My informants also say that, in recent years, arranged marriages are not as strict as they were in the past. They say that people have a common misunderstanding about arranged marriages. Those who do not understand regard arranged marriages as a product of manipulation in a patriarchal society. Indeed, it is just a system for parents to help their children find possible partners. The decision making still falls in the hands of the children themselves. First of all, there are usually informal gatherings for the match in order to find out more about each other. Such an arrangement allows them to have a chance to decide if they can accept the potential partners. Therefore, it is not a system for parents to force their children to marry someone they have never met or someone that they dislike.

Besides, parents usually choose someone from a well-respected family they know of for their children. Such an arrangement ensures that the future son-in-laws will not bring shame to the family. Caste is also a consideration in the matter. Members of different castes made efforts to know the caste of the potential families and adjust the relations accordingly (Rajoo 1984: 215). In addition, an ideal partner is usually the child of a family friend and the marriage will offer an advantage to link the two families. To organize such a matching, the role of the parents is very important, as they will decide what is the best for their children. Social status, caste, and family reputation are factors to be considered. Therefore, the marriage is the concern of not only the couple but also of the two families. My informant, Mrs. R, once said, "I don't think a westerner will understand but Asians such as Japanese and Chinese will easily understand the system although arranged marriages are no longer widely practised in these places. Even in India, arranged marriages are not as popular as before because the young ones want to choose the person that they want to get married with." And she emphasized that, after all, arranged marriage is not something that your family forces you to do but a personal choice. Besides, it is not something that you can work on but a mentality that one needs to prepare for. Therefore, if a child has already prepared for an arranged marriage, the possibility of having a good marriage is pretty high. In Mrs. R's family, not all her family members have gone through arranged marriages. Her elder brother said he could never marry a girl without previous dating because she would like to learn more about the girl from her mentality to her feelings about different things. On the other hand, her younger brother thought that he would not mind marrying a girl without any previous dating. Therefore, we can see that there is also a high degree of flexibility in the setting of arranged marriages.



When I asked Ms. U, an Indian woman in her late twenties, about her views on marriage, she said that it was a very complicated question for her to answer. She thought that it was relatively difficult for her to find someone in Hong Kong, as she had no family members here. It was a disadvantage to find a partner without her parents around. As a girl turning twenty-eight, she was considered too old to get married. Besides, she did not think that Hong Kong Chinese boys liked Indian girls. Therefore, for her, the marriage market was very small.

Recently, she had decided to move to Singapore, where she found a permanent job. She expected that there was a higher possibility for her to find someone in Singapore because there are more Indians living there. She also considered the possibility of an arranged match in India if she could not find someone in the coming two years. After all, she said that she just wants to find someone who had a similar mind as she did. She was afraid that her mentality was very different from many Indians at home because of her exposure to work abroad for so many years. Personally, she preferred to look for someone with international experiences for she had resided in a metropolitan city like Hong Kong so far. If she got married she still wanted to continue her career in the area of computer engineering as well as her overseas position, which was very challenging. However, she knew that she needed to choose between family and career if her partner did not want her to work.

In Hong Kong, the matching pool is limited because the size of the Indian population is small. Indian boys here are more likely to marry someone from home whereas Indian women raised in Hong Kong are less likely to go back to India for marriages. One of my informants explained that mentalities between those living abroad and those living in India are different.

Informants who are parents have different attitudes towards marriages for their children. Indeed, many parents claim that they do not mind their children having love marriages because arranged marriage is no longer as popular even in India. Although many parents who went through arranged marriages find advantages to the arrangement, they do not want to impose the same practice on their children. A mother of a teenage girl, Mrs. R exclaimed, “I only hope that I will be notified when she will get married. If she doesn’t, I will say, ‘you don’t even invite me to your wedding, my dear!’” As her daughter was studying abroad, she thought it is already difficult to keep track of her friends. It would be more appropriate for her daughter to find the loved one. Mrs. R also added, “I can’t help her find a boy because I don’t know anybody here. Ha!” With a joking manner, it also indicates that it is important for parents to establish good linkages well in advance in order to find a good match for their children.

However, these parents are not giving up their duties. They still think that it is important to teach their children to be a good partner, a good wife and a good mother. Mrs. R seems to be a mother with an open mind. She said that most of her time has been spent on educating or taking care of her daughter. After her daughter has left Hong Kong for college in the United States, Mrs. R found herself with too much spare time. She tried to occupy herself by joining interesting activities, rather than staying at home. She found herself losing the focal point that she had before. That is also one of her reasons to join activities launched by Hong Kong Indian Women’s Club.

Another lady, Mrs. W, has also been advised by her husband to spend more time with her daughter as their child plans to get married within a year. To provide her daughter with necessary support and preparation, she decided to close her



jewellery-designing house. As she took her job only as a hobby but placed more emphasis on her roles as both a wife and a mother, she made the decision without much hesitation. Being a good mother seems to be a major concern of Indian ladies among the Indian women of the club.

As said before, the number of intermarriages between Chinese and Indians is relatively small. One may ask, "Is it difficult for an Indian family to accept their children getting married with a Chinese?" Many Indian parents appear to be open about their children's choices over spouses. However, Mr. P, still single, said that he could hardly imagine himself marrying a Chinese girl because his parents will never allow him to do so. Another female informant has the same reply. Both said that they could imagine themselves getting married with whites rather than Chinese. And their parents are more likely to accept such a match. The limited intermarriage between Chinese and Indians also reveal a high degree of segregation between the two ethnic groups. This question has brought up another discussion on the level of acculturation.

This kind of preference may be related to the aesthetic judgement of Indians: it is beautiful to be white, pale and fair. Besides, it is probably an indication of a western supremacy in the culture. It indicates the inclination of people towards western standards on beauty or simply that it is another social construction of how people are more likely to relate "white" with being good and beautiful or other positive things.

As we all know, it is difficult for a couple to adjust to a new life together because there are many variables including religion, ethnic background, and so on. Intermarriage between two different ethnic groups is even more complicated. And yet, Mrs. R provided an example to illustrate that intermarriages can work perfectly.

She said that her Indian friend got married with a Caucasian. After the marriage, the woman takes care of their house and the man has a stronger influence over their children's education than his wife does. Their children enjoy more freedom than other children from Indian families. Their food is prepared in both western and Indian styles. My informant pointed out that the couple could influence each other because they are both young and willing to compromise. Just like marriages between two people of the same ethnic background, compromise is always the key for a successful marriage. Therefore, both arranged and non-arranged marriages can be successful if the couple is willing to complement each other.

According to Indian traditions, dowry will be given by the girl's family to the son-in-law so as to make sure that the girl will be taken care of. In India, dowry can be jewels and clothes. The girl's family decides the amount of dowry. As a Punjabi, Mrs. R explained that different groups adopt different wedding practices. Groups of different regions and religions also have their own wedding practices. Besides, wedding practices are also decided by family traditions. Sindhis and Punjabis, for example, will follow different practices. For example, when the son of one association head got married, the head invited thousands of guests to join a seven-day celebration in the traditions of Sindhis. Seven types of cards were printed for inviting guests to attend various occasions. Twelve musicians were invited from India -- a rare practice in India as most families would play tapes rather than having live band during ceremonies. Comparatively speaking, wedding celebration for Punjabis is much simpler. Perhaps, it is also related to the issue of class.

We can see that there are various marriage patterns among Indian groups. Ceremonial practices adopted by different communities are also different. A



demarcation is not only drawn between Chinese and Indians but also between different ethnic groups among Indian communities.

## **Religion**

Religions seem to create another division between Hong Kong Chinese and Indians because the general Chinese population does not really understand the religions of most Indians. In Hong Kong, most Indians follow Hinduism. There are also some Muslims and Christians among them. The territory so far has two Hindu temples (Mandir), a Sikh Temple (Gurdhwara), some Muslim mosques of Sunni and Shia Bohra Muslim sects and many religious centres of different religious groups and numerous home shrines.

Some Indians try to tune down their religious differences with the Chinese. They compare their beliefs with the Chinese in a way to narrow down the gap between them. Indians try to maintain an impression that they are just like Chinese in matters of beliefs, customs and traditions. Like the Chinese, they practise their religions at home or at temples. Women also pray for the well being of the family. They emphasize the fact that the number of Hindu temples and Muslim mosques in the territory is far less than the number of churches. Therefore, they are just a minority group, which enjoys religious freedom. One informant also claimed that Indians respected Chinese sages such as Confucius as well as the religious practices of the Chinese. Such a statement implies that Chinese should adopt an attitude of mutual respect for Indian religions.

Even though Indians appreciate the religious tolerance of Hong Kong, they still have difficulties in practising their faiths. Many Indians stuck to their rituals strictly when they were in India. After coming to Hong Kong, however, they find it

difficult to do so. For example, many Hindu pray to the god Shiva every morning before starting their business. Some Hong Kong Hindus choose to set up their own shrines at home so that they can pray to deities before leaving for work.

Mr. K, a new arrival, complained that as an Indian vegetarian, he has difficulties finding Indian vegetarian food. Consequently, he has to eat some meat. Some of my informants claimed that there is no point to avoid meat (such as fish, chicken, and lamb) because most restaurants in Hong Kong use the same utensils to prepare both vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes. "Everything is gone!" Mr. K concluded.

Divali (the Festival of Light) is still celebrated among the Hindus. In India, firecracker is a feature of the festival but it is not allowed in Hong Kong. Anyway, sweets are passed among family members during the festival and family gathering is the main activity of the festival. Families and friends wish each other good luck in the coming year, just like Chinese New Year.

To a certain extent, Indian festivals can be used to illustrate that Indians are different from the rest of the Chinese population. However, festivals can also be used as a channel for them to introduce their culture to Hong Kong Chinese. One informant, Mr. A, suggested that a grand celebration of an Indian festival should be held at a public venue, such as Victoria Park. It can make Indian culture known to both local Indians and Hong Kong Chinese. Although he is a Muslim, he suggested that Divali, a widely celebrated festival, can be singled out for that grand celebration. It may also save Hong Kong Indians from losing their own identity, especially those who have resided in Hong Kong for so long. For example, Mr. A complained that his grandchildren do not speak Tamil but a mixture of English and Cantonese at home. He also mentioned that he is bothered by her daughter that she does not wear



saris because she thinks it is not trendy. "She just looks like a Chinese, after marrying a Chinese," Mr. A exclaimed. Mr. A finds that Indians are losing their identity in every way. He is worried that his grand children are westernized. For Indians who send their children to international schools, there is even a much greater possibility for the children to be westernized, as they are rarely in touch with Indian culture. It is one of the reasons that Mr. A sends all his grandchildren to a local Hong Kong school, with Hindi being taught by Indian teachers outside school hours.

With high hopes, Mr. A believes that through such an open parade of their beliefs, customs and culture, they can demonstrate their distinctiveness as an ethnic group in Hong Kong. Besides, it provides a channel for them to unit together because such a manifestation will easily enable them to maintain their identity as a whole.

Indeed, Divali had a different meaning to my informant Ms. B, an Indian teenage girl, who participated in the performance for the Divali Ball this year. In the past she joined only as an audience but this year she was excited to participate in the performance. For a young performer like Ms. B, it was quite an extraordinary experience to perform in front of hundreds of people. It was simply like a talent show for youngsters to perform what they have learnt from their own culture. As Ms. B said, it would be something very different from what a Hong Kong girl of her age could do. Although many traditional Indian parents would not be willing to allow their daughters to be on stage, my informant, Ms. B finally got the approval of her father under the condition that she would dance only with girls on stage.

Although it seemed that she had a very different life if compared with that of her Chinese schoolmates who had never experienced such a fabulous way to celebrate a festival, she found that her schoolmates were very interested in her

experiences. Her life became more interesting as she had an exposure different from that of schoolmates and they could share their different experiences.

Perhaps, these are the reasons why my informant, Mr. N, is so keen on organizing activities for the Tamil Cultural Association. As part of the committee, he thinks that activities help his children to learn more about Indian culture. “Although not all Indians practise their religions, about 99% of the population believes there is a god above us.” Mr. N tried to explain the importance of religion in educating their children about Indian cultural values. It is an essential socialization process for children. Mr. N adds, “We teach our children religion, the god, and the belief. Through this process of knowledge sharing, it will finally come into their blood. Although the moral values of people have changed, I believe Indians are following the same system of their forefathers.”

In Hong Kong, celebrations are carried out in very different manners. They are also good opportunities for various Indian associations to organize observances of the festivals. Indian staff goes to office to celebrate the New Year with their colleagues and Indians working for restaurants are involved in the preparation of the celebration. According to Mr. K, festivals can easily come and go without noticing because they do not come along with public holidays. “You know, when Hong Kong people are not celebrating, you won't have the same feeling as in India. The environment is different and everything does not fit well.”

The Festival of Light is celebrated differently by Muslims. Although they do not practise Divali, they welcome the visit of their friends. As Muslims do not really practise Divali themselves, it becomes less noticeable for them. “It is still an occasion for expressing love, although we do not actively celebrate Divali,” Mr. N emphasized. Ms. M, a student whose father is head of a religious organization in



Hong Kong, finds herself very much devoted to her religion under the influence of her family. She also began to believe in the *guru* (the spiritual teacher) that her family believes in. In 1999, the guru had invited her father for an interview, which was a very special gesture for a few devotees. Each year, her family goes back to India for the celebration of the guru's birthday. As there is a large number of Chinese who believe in the same guru, professionals are invited to perform a lion dance for the guru. Each time she goes back to India, she finds it very exciting for she can learn more about her religion. Besides, she is delighted to see the combination of the two cultures, Chinese and Indian, through the celebration. It also shows that through religion, there is a cultural exchange between the two countries

Studying in a Catholic school, Ms. M does not find any conflicts between her own religious backgrounds and the institution because she believes that all religions lead to one god. Jesus is just like another guru who came down to the earth to teach people more about God. Her guru teaches her the values of other religions because all these are important values for people to learn. Therefore, different religions actually follow the same god. They are just different in practice but not necessarily in nature.

For Indian children who are born in Hong Kong, they sometimes find it difficult to follow the religious practices adopted by their parents. For example, for the religious observance, Ms. A, a Muslim, brings her own food for lunch rather than eating at the cafeterias where pork free food is not usually provided. During the period of fasting, she needs to continue her routine as a student. Therefore, it is very difficult during the period of Ramadam<sup>6</sup>, when she needs to fast for the whole

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<sup>6</sup> The Islamic month of fasting and penitence.

day until sunset but her friends at school can eat what they like. On the whole, she obeys her parents, without thinking too much about the conflicts between her religion and her daily activities.

Another informant, Mrs. R, has never found practising her religion a problem because she does not need a temple for religious practices. As a Pubjabi Hindu herself, she adopts a particular form of Hinduism for her religious practice. The ritual that she performs does not involve any idol worship. She only needs to carry out a fire ceremony, *haven*, with her group regularly and worship the spirit of the fire. The practice is influenced by the Arya Samaj Movement, an Indian religious movement which worship a single formless fire spirit (White 1994: 152). Even in India, the temple is only a hall without any decorations but a fire at the centre for the worshippers to gather and sing hymns around it. When her first daughter was born, she took her child back to India so that her parents could help her conduct the birth rite for the child. Other than that, she seldom performs any of ritual. As a result, religion becomes a spiritual existence of god inside her heart. Rituals are manifestations that help people understand god better.

Although many Indians seem to have different religious practices, after sharing their religious beliefs with me, many added that they believe in the unity of the people more than anything. "Even though Indians are from different castes, they will come down to one religion, one god. Indians are still together," my informant emphasized. All in all, they respect practices of other religions as all gods all come down to one ultimate being in the end. All Indians are also under one god. Some people even extend this idea to a larger population, the mankind. With such a belief, many have developed a spirit of helping each other in the group, which also extends to other communities. Perhaps, this virtue has also motivated Indians



to participate in various charitable activities and work for good causes. Their religions bring many of them back to India from time to time. Thus, they can establish a stronger linkage with India which helps the establishment the network of transnationalism.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Ethnic markers can affect the boundary drawing between ethnic groups. These markers can serve as objective limitations, which make the boundary more distinctive, and yet, they can be ignored or emphasized in different situations. In addition, the experiences of migrants also affect their perception of Hong Kong and their relationship with other ethnic groups. Although many informants would not consider their negative experiences as a form of discrimination, these incidents are also accounted for their experiences in Hong Kong. No matter how we define discrimination, it is still important to consider if educating the public is sufficient to eliminate discrimination. Or, perhaps, it is necessary to have laws to increase people's awareness of the need to reduce negative stereotypes and indifferent attitudes.

## **Chapter 5**

### **The Transnational Network Between Hong Kong and India**

Many Indian settlers in Hong Kong still have a close linkage with India, though they have resided in the territory for years. They pay visits to India during vacations and maintain a network with families and friends there. During the process of transnationalism, migrants develop social fields which links their country of origin and their country of settlement. The idea of transnationalism is no longer limited to the level of physical linkage but also a sentimental attachment towards the country which involves familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political relations (Schiller, Basch and Blanc-Szanton 1992: 1). In this section, I would like to explore the fluidity of the idea of transnationalism and its practice among Hong Kong Indians. In additions, the “nuclear tests debate” will be considered as a discourse to further examine the relationship between Hong Kong Indians and their homeland India because the nuclear weapon issue was widely discussed among Hong Kong Indians at the time of research.

#### **Transnationalism**

During summer vacations, many Indians in Hong Kong go back to India to visit their families. Indeed, even some associations have decided that it is a good time to take a break. Many Indian restaurants, usually busy all year around, also take the chance to allow their staff to leave for vacations.

Involvement of associations provides additional opportunities for my informants to visit India more frequently. In the case of Mrs. M, a board member of



an association under CHIA, she visits India frequently from two to three to several times a year. As a third generation Hong Kong resident, being born and raised in Hong Kong, most of her relatives are either abroad or in Hong Kong. She aims to establish a better network within India through her frequent visits. As the club has the function of promoting Indian culture within local Indian communities, as part of the mission of the club, she thinks that it is important to maintain the link between India and Hong Kong. Her attempt helps the association to maintain organizational and social linkage with India.

Mrs. W, another organizer, said that she only lived in India for a few years when she was young. Apart from that, she returned for vacations but could stay for one or two weeks only. However, she considered these short stays very important in educating herself and her children about India. During the stay, she claimed that her westernized children had a chance to learn Indian values. It is also one of the reasons why she wanted her children to be more involved in Indian organizations in Hong Kong. Although she has resided in Hong Kong since she got married in the sixties, she thought that it is important for Indians not to lose their Indian ties, no matter where they are.

Some informants said that the relationship between Hong Kong and India is weak because Indian associations in Hong Kong do not really have a strong link with India. They only got involved in cases like crisis or natural disasters that happen in India. If India suffers from any disaster, members of associations will be affected as many are involved in business between Hong Kong and India. The import and export business will also be influenced by the economic and political climate of the two places. "Otherwise, we do nothing with India," said one informant. However, many business associations still make sure that elite or government officials from

India are well received by CHIA. It is also part of the mission of the associations since many of them are business oriented.

To a certain extent, physical linkage between the two places seems to base on business and family ties. And yet, the boundary seems to be less apparent if we look at the relations between Hong Kong Indian communities and The Consulate General of India.

As migrants who are not well accepted by the host country may maintain a stronger attachment towards their homeland, Indians' experience in Hong Kong may influence their relationship with India. Such a reaction is commonly found among new migrants who are not used to the life of their new environment. "You know, the bond here is not good once you are out of the country. There is a sense of belonging within Indian communities in Hong Kong but not for all new comers." Mr. K said. Many sojourners who come to Hong Kong for a temporary stay will take every chance to visit their homeland. Mr. R said, "Once I have a leave, I will go back to India, not anywhere else." Mr. R, as a sojourner, finds his own sense of attachment towards India, where he has much of his experience.

With the development of high technology, effective means of communications and transportation, the gap between India and Hong Kong has narrowed. In Hong Kong, one can read Indian news by ordering newspaper from India and the lapse between the publication date and the delivery date is two days only. Many downtown buildings have cable TV for Indian channels and one can choose from a wide range of programs provided by seventy or more Indian channels. Internet has also linked the whole world, not only India and Hong Kong together. Everything can be read from Internet within a minute. The supply of fresh food is never a problem for local Indians because there are always stores with delivery



services. Although some informants pointed out that the supply of Indian goods in Hong Kong is not as good as that in Singapore and Britain where there are large Indian populations with fresh food from local markets, they can manage with the resources they get from the stores. In addition, families can bring back a lot of supplies from India once they go back for visits. The interchange between India and Hong Kong ensures the economic linkage between two places.

My informant, Mr. N, also said that although many Indians return to their India for merely a couple of weeks per trip, they have not forgotten their culture. They enjoy going back and visit their families. They appreciate cultural programs offered by the associations as well as those on cable TV. Even though they may not have in-depth knowledge about the culture, they like to know more about Indian culture.

Transmigrants develop not only familial relations but also social relations with India, the sending country. Hong Kong Indians can identify with the cultural programs provided by Indian channels and feel concerns for Indian culture in general, which connect the transmigrants to the sending country, even though they have never resided in the country for a long time. Media has brought more cultural knowledge to the transmigrants and their children.

Ms. S, a local-born Hong Kong Indian, said,

I actually find myself liking India more than Hong Kong, even though I have never resided there for more than a couple of weeks. It seems that I have been living outside of my hometown for so many years that I would like to go back there for a longer period of time. I find myself at home there. Being with the people of your own culture, of your own religion, speaking the same language and having the same ideas.

TV She plans to move back to India to find a job after completing her undergraduate studies. She can foresee herself giving up the convenience she enjoys in Hong Kong and settling down comfortably in an environment of Indian culture.

Other than bringing Hong Kong Indians to India to learn the culture, some Indians also attempt to introduce more Indian things to Hong Kong Indians. The borderline between two countries becomes less obvious due to a flow of Indian products. To bring in more entertainment for Hong Kong Indians, two ladies, Mrs. K and Mrs. P, have decided to establish their own company to show Indian movies in Hong Kong. After starting the program for a year, the company has established a good linkage between India and Hong Kong and attracted a group of local audience in Hong Kong.

In the past, Indian movies were screened in Hong Kong through organizations such as the Tamil Cultural Association. However, the blossom of video business has slowed down the development of the movie business. Mrs. P and Mrs. K pointed out that Hong Kong Indians, who have access to pirated VCDs with unclear screen for most of the time, do miss films. If they can get these movies, Hong Kong Indians can enjoy these films on a big screen.

According to my informants, it is a complicated process to show Indian films in Hong Kong. A successful negotiation with the distributor does not necessarily guarantee that the film can be released within two weeks. They still have to deal with such problems like the censorship of the films and the booking of the Hong Kong Convention Centre for showing the film.

With the advancement in communications and media technology, Hong Kong Indians are now familiar with popular songs and blockbuster movies through cable



TV and the internet. Latest information on cultural activities can also be publicized through faxes, flyers and emails.

Indeed, film showing is not a sure profit making business, especially if the film is shown on a date when many activities are going on within the Indian community. For example, the show in November clashed with a spiritual lecture given by a well-known teacher at the Holiday Inn which took away a good part of the potential audience for the show. The organizers also have difficulties in advertising the film because it is not an easy task to make the movie known to all Hong Kong Indian communities. They only have easy access to the people of their own community, which can be very limited. They would like to extend their audience to cover businessmen, students and teaching staff of universities who are more upbeat with popular culture in India.

We can see that, through their own means, Hong Kong Indian communities are bringing together products of Hong Kong and India, making the borderline between the two places less distinct. Hong Kong Indians are also involved in the import and export business. This further reduces the distinctions of the borderline. And yet, the most important of all, is the attachment that the people feel towards their homeland. As declared by my informant, Mr. M, "We are of Indian origin. Everyone is related to India." Such a feeling is also accountable towards the process of transnationalism, which allows more linkages between places. These linkages are overlapping with complicated function of networking. Through such exchanges, Hong Kong is added with a taste of ethnic flavour that makes the city more vibrant and metropolitan.

## **The closeness between China and India**

Many informants suggested that there was a close relationship between China and India. They took the initiative to give me ample examples to support their argument. I am not sure if they are trying to make me feel closer to them when they pull the two countries together or they really think that the two cultures are much alike. They, especially those who stay in Hong Kong as settlers, claim that Chinese and Indian cultures have similarities in many aspects. One of the examples often cited by my informants is religion. They told me that since the introduction of Buddhism to China, the two countries have shared a long history together. When they talked about their own religions, they tried to find parallel examples from Chinese beliefs so as to give me a better idea. For example, when an informant told me that he burns incense everyday for the God Siva before starting business, he compared this practice with Kwun Yin (Goddess of Mercy) worship by Chinese. The significance of religion in the Indian family business is expressed through the display of public religiosity (Dorairajoo 1994: 193). Another commonality, pointed out by my informant, is family values. It plays an important role in both Indian and Chinese families. My informants thought that in both cultures, the family does override individual rights in many circumstances. This phenomenon is a common feature among East Asians. My informants believed that both Chinese and Indians are still very traditional in many areas. In the end, they reached a consensus that both Chinese and Indian cultures are world class.

Although Indians claim that they are close to Hong Kong Chinese, we can see divergences in their opinions when discussing the issue of nuclear weapons. The discussion can serve as a discourse that helps us understand their position in such a crisis. As most Indians do follow religions, recent debates on nuclear weapon



becomes a tough topic for them as nuclear weapons can cause harm to the mankind and yet it can maintain the integrity of the nation. It is a sensitive ethical issue for my informants to discuss.

After talking to several informants on nuclear issue, I gradually found a pattern among informants: supporters of government policies are those who have resided in Hong Kong for a limited period of time. Indians who are settlers in the territory, in contrast, tend to avoid the issue. Or, they try not to indicate their position and emphasize their support towards the stability of the economy where they reside. Like a reflex action, they immediately emphasize the political standpoint of Hong Kong Indians (on behalf of all Indians in Hong Kong) as neutral and indifferent to political issues. They reiterate that they are Hong Kong people who love Hong Kong and find themselves at home. Their standpoint also indicates their own will and their own perception of how other Indians may react on the issue.

Indeed, the debate on the issue of nuclear weapon does not only arouse the attention of the public but it also reviews the historical relationship between India and China, as well as between India and Pakistan. India first tested its nuclear weapon on 12 May 1998, which created a big reaction among the world powers. The United States urged India to sign a peace treaty to stop nuclear tests in future. Otherwise, it would reconsider its loan plan to India. Japan also released a similar message and stopped a 10 billion US dollars loan plan to India. China kept silent though its authorities later declared that the test would affect the relations between Asian countries.

The relationship between China and India had become tense since the Indian Minister of Defence announced that China was the first enemy of New Dehli a week before the test. He commented that India's national security was threatened by

China, more than by Pakistan because China was having conflicts with India on the matters of religion and land since the partition in 1947.

As China is alleged to be a major distributor of nuclear technology to Pakistan, the relationship between China and India becomes more complicated. Although many politicians came out to say that China and India maintain a good relationship in previous years, the tension still exists.

Even though a few of my informants declined to comment on the issue for it is too sensitive which can easily be misinterpreted, some of them voiced out their opinions bluntly. There were also informants who tried not to take a stand though they were actually very concerned over the matter.

My informants who have settled in Hong Kong for a long time pointed out that that nuclear weapons are made by other countries. The United States and China are always on the top at the list when they cited examples. One of my informants put forth his argument by commenting on the relationship between China and Taiwan, which is another example to show world powers threatening each other all the time and yet it is merely a power game rather than a physical war. One of my informants, Mr. Y said, "It is simply a race. It is a race between countries as weapon means power. It is something very political." One informant simply declared, "No (Hong Kong) Indians will be in the mess. Those who are involved are just Indian politicians." Many of them took the opportunities to clarify their personal stands or the positions of the associations. "The associations are nothing but communal associations. Nothing political," many organizers assured me. In addition, they also reiterated their identity as Hong Kong Indians who have been residing in the territory for generations. Some informants simply excluded Hong Kong Indians from the mess by saying that it is just a matter between India and



Pakistan. Hong Kong Indians love peace and they just want to be long-term residents of the territory. They are more concerned with the stability of global political and economic climate, which is directly related to the economy of Hong Kong.

Many Indian sojourners had strong opinions on the issue. Although some informants agreed that India should develop itself so as to protect the people, they might not necessarily support the production of nuclear power. They believed that other countries including the United States do not have the right to stop India from producing nuclear weapons since they have developed theirs. Therefore, the use of economic strategies to stop other countries from producing nuclear weapons is unconvincing. According to Indian information, Pakistan imports nuclear technology from China and the move will threaten the national security of India. As a result, the country needs to develop its own weapons to defend itself. One informant, Ms U, added that as the Indian government has been changed several times in the past ten years, people feel that government is quite vulnerable. To gain a stronger sense of security, Indians need to find ways to protect themselves. An informant asked me, "who is going to defend us if we do not have arms? Americans? People are not used to India to have such an attitude. That's it!"

Mrs. N further elaborated her argument over nuclear issue. She believed that India has excellent brainpower as shown in the number of Indian staff at Space Station in Florida and Silicon Valley in California. Indians are scientifically oriented people and India, as a country, wants to show its ability in front of other world powers. Moreover, there is no need for India to borrow nuclear technology from China, like Pakistan. It is unfortunate that in this year, nuclear weapon is used as a means to measure the technology strength of a country and the level of

technology means power. Therefore, Mrs. N concluded, "Technology is really good and we do not feel negative about India's nuclear plan."

Again, it is no longer a simple discussion on whether India shall possess any nuclear weapons. It is more like a matter of national pride, a chance for Hong Kong Indians to support their country's decision rather than a moral choice. This revealed the position of various informants and provided me with a valuable opportunity to have a better understanding of their viewpoints and feelings towards India and Hong Kong.

Heads of associations expressed their concerns about the issue. They found it worth discussing although they tried not to touch politics. To help investors know more about current situation of India and its relationship with China and other countries, forums and talks are organized by associations. As pointed out by Mrs. W, "Why don't we worry about the economy in Hong Kong and try not to get ourselves into another crisis dwelling on politics?" I am not sure if she really wanted to get off the subject or it is simply not her key concern. I am also not sure whether her usage of "we" was to address Hong Kong people in general or Hong Kong Indians. At least, we can see that Hong Kong seems to be the focal point of these informants.

We can see different ethnic groups vary in their reaction towards the issue. As a business community, Indians in Hong Kong want to ensure a peaceful environment with a stable economy to attract further foreign investments, which in turn will benefit the community and the territory itself. Perhaps, it is the ultimate concern of all Hong Kong Indians. On the other hand, those who are sojourners, tend to use the "we" to represent people of India, the Indian people. We can see



how Indians line themselves up when facing a crisis. The boundary is easily seen through the ways they identify themselves.

On this issue, it shows that ethnic identity of Indians is raised to a national level. Indian sojourners identify with India, rather than their regional groups in this situation, emphasizing their Indianness through supporting their country's policies. Their nationalistic behavior brings up their ethnic identity separating themselves as a distinctive group from the rest of Hong Kong Indian settlers, through tracing their relationship to India. On the other hand, some Indian settlers choose to remain silent on this issue to avoid further involvement in the matter. Their indifferent attitude serves as a contrast to the clear standpoint of Indian sojourners.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

Through associations, ethnic identity of Indians can be enhanced through organized activities. From these activities, we can observe how Indians identify themselves with their families, their groups, their roles as Indians in Hong Kong and overseas Indians. In addition, we can see how activities manifest the group identity through projecting observable variance between different ethnic groups. As associations have clearly marked the boundaries between different groups, we can see how Indians present their ethnic identity through maintaining these boundaries.

On the basis of shared commitments and legal principals, members of associations organize a wide range of activities with the available resources. To a certain extent, the existence of associations caters for the needs of members to have socio-cultural satisfaction. Members can satisfy themselves through joining cultural programs, either as performers on stage or as audience. To establish a sense of belonging for members is an important function of ethnic associations. Through these activities, members can develop a networking of their own group of members sharing similar interests.

Indian associations devote themselves to promote the relationship within their own group but they have done very little to improve the relationship between Chinese and Indians in Hong Kong. Due to a lack of understanding between these two groups, Chinese always have negative stereotypes of Indians. The study of variables such as language, religion, marriage, caste and even the recent debate on nuclear weapon help us learn more about the differences between ethnic groups. And yet, these variables are not necessarily so powerful as they seem to. "You can



always find many similarities and differences between two cultures if you want to", as my informants suggested. Differences exist between ethnic groups among Indian communities. Thus, we can see variances between activities organized by The Tamil Cultural Association and associations under CHIA.

And yet, these variances do not necessarily account for the segregation between the two groups. The consideration of subjective experience of Indians provides more room in the exploration of ethnic sentiments. In the negotiation of ethnic identity, there is certain degree of emotional attachment that people have towards the identity they choose, despite the ethnic markers that differentiate one group from another. The subjective experience has created non-rational reactions of people towards their identities. Such fluidity also stimulates researchers to further look into the subject. For example, on the issue of nuclear weapon, it is not simply a matter of supporting the making of nuclear weapon by one country but a chance to react towards the policies of India out of ethnic sentiments. The positions of informants have switched from outsiders to insiders, as there is a possibility for them to be affected by their opinions on the issue. In the face of such a crisis, the decision making also appears to be a critical one, which reflects their position at the boundary drawing between Hong Kong and India. It parallels Barth's concept of the maintenance of boundary between groups in order to identify membership. The carefulness of informants in addressing the issue shows the possibility to politicize the subject matter. This issue also shows the increased politicization of ethnicity at different levels: from a personal to an organizational level.

The emphasis of subjective experience of ethnic group also carries the implication that migrants do not necessarily identify with the physical region that they are from but their subjective experience as a migrant. The drawing of

boundary between ethnic group also relate to the length of time that they have resided in Hong Kong and their personal experience as a migrant here. However, the subjective experience that they have during their residency at the hosting country varies. In the case of Hong Kong Indians, their experience determines their attachment towards Hong Kong and their impression of Hong Kong Chinese regardless of the cultural characteristics mentioned above which may differentiate them from Hong Kong Chinese. Indians carry different opinions in the drawing of boundary between Hong Kong Chinese and Indians, because they have different interpretations about their experience in Hong Kong. The place that they identify with affects their perception of ethnic relations of different groups. For example, an Indian settler who identifies with Hong Kong interprets nationalism differently from that of an Indian sojourner.

In the negotiation of ethnic identity, there are also other variables, which can affect the decision of where people identify with. There is always a subtle process of picking and choosing identity at various situations and circumstances. However, we can see that it is not totally out of a rational choice, as instrumentalists would claim. The decision also concerns the sense of attachment that the person has towards the group. The situation that Indian settlers identify with Hong Kong as their home rather than India reveals that the primordialists' explanation towards ethnicity is not all true. The "givenness" of identity does not account for all the complex feelings that Hong Kong Indians have towards the territory. Many settlers will not agree with sojourners' comments that the settlers regard India only as another tourist spot but not a place with sentiments. Since many are born or raised in Hong Kong, they choose to identify with Hong Kong as it is where they have much knowledge and experiences. And yet, they can maintain a good relation with



India where they may identify with when needed. Such an attachment also helps to create a transnational network between India and Hong Kong.

Transnationalism is not simply the degree of physical attachment towards India but also the social relations that the transmigrants establish, with emotional sentiments and concerns. With the improvement in technology, information can be obtained from various sources. The idea of "ethnoscape" of Appadurai can be fully demonstrated by the fast flowing of people from one place to another with the help of improved communications and transportation. Above all, the social field is established between the land that the immigrants settle and their place of origin through the process of networking in associations (Schiller, Basch & Blanz-Szanton: 1992). In the process, Indians can also manipulate their multiple identities.

With Gilroy's (1987) model of diaspora group, we can see that Hong Kong Indians may believe that they are well received by their host, Hong Kong. On the other hand, they still lack the sense of security towards a city under the rule of "One Country, Two Systems," as revealed in the fact that many of them applied for British passports. Some also consider the possibility of returning to India. There are variations on individual decisions. Although Indians in Hong Kong do not fall into all the categories that are mentioned by Gilroy as a diaspora group, most important of all, there are certain characteristics that they can identify with. They still maintain a memory and a vision towards their homeland, with the group solidarity repeatedly redefined through taking part in activities organized by associations. They are simply living in a community of different consciousness and solidarity outside the framework of the national time/space when the activities are taken place.

The activities organized by associations recollect fragmented and selected memory of India and reconstruct the reality through the presentation of activities,

with the essence of imagination. Perhaps, the degree of acculturation of Hong Kong Indians is not as easily noticeable in daily life except through the drawing of boundary between the Chinese and Indians who encounter one another. Sojourners consider Indian settlers in Hong Kong as another group of Chinese who are inclined to the ideas and life style of Hong Kong Chinese. With or without notice such a difference in interpreting "Indianness", as suggested by sojourners, Hong Kong Indian settlers do continue their association life with their expression of "Indianness". Indeed, the idea of "Indianness" is also worthwhile to further discuss as the term is subject to interpretation. Perhaps, as Sunil Khilnani (1997:8) comments on the Indian nationalists, "They had to make themselves Indian according to their own ideas of what exactly that meant." And yet, through redefining the concept of various groups, the boundary can be clearly seen. Such an invention of traditions helps in creating an imagined community (Anderson, 1983) which brings in more variations in the interpretation of the meaning of India and traditions among ethnic groups.

Indeed, the study of ethnicity is fascinating, but it is also complicated, just like Indian culture itself. Many believe that ethnicity is no longer an issue worth discussion as the world has become more pluralistic and the process of globalization seems to have taken over the importance of ethnicity. And yet, we find that the ethnicity is still fundamental in world politics and tensions. In the case of Hong Kong Indians, the careful move to play down ethnic flavour of the communities or associations in order to avoid further politicize the issue of ethnicity, shows that the subject matter remains touchy and sensitive. With such a careful presentation, we can still see the importance of ethnicity and its role in the life of people.



This thesis aims to provide a further understanding of Indian communities in Hong Kong. They seem to be so close (physically) but also so far (mentally) away from Hong Kong Chinese. Perhaps, only more positive experience in their daily life can promote a better relationship between Chinese and Indians in Hong Kong.

## Appendix I List of Informants

<b>Name</b>	<b>Place of Birth</b>	<b>Generation in Hong Kong</b>	<b>Ag</b>	<b>Association</b>
Alan	Hong Kong	Second Generation	32	None
Mr. A	Tamil	First Generation	60	Tamil Cultural Association
Mr. B	Haryana	First Generation	48	India Association Hong Kong
Mr. C	Karnataka	First Generation	40	India Association Hong Kong
Mr. D	Sind	First Generation	40	The Hindu Mosque
Mr. E	Haryana	First Generation	47	India Association Hong Kong
Mr. F	Rajasthan	First Generation	35	None
Mr. H	Sind	First Generation	60	None
Mr. I	Sind	First Generation	62	CHIA
Mr. K	Haryana	First Generation	27	India Club Hong Kong
Mr. L	Andhra Pradesh	First Generation	42	India Club Hong Kong
Mr. Lee	Hong Kong	Second Generation	54	None
Mr. M	Sind	First Generation	55	India Association Hong Kong
Mr. N	Tamil	First Generation	46	Tamil Cultural Association
Mr. P	Haryana	First Generation	43	The Hindu Mosque
Mr. R	Tamil	First Generation	35	Tamil Cultural Association
Mr. S		Third Generation	38	Overseas Indian Organization
Mr. V	Philippines	First Generation	36	NGO Staff
Mr. Y	Tamil	First Generation	70	Tamil Cultural Association
Mr. Z	Punjab	First Generation	41	India Club Hong Kong
Mrs. K	West Bengal	First Generation	46	Hong Kong Indian Women's Club
Mrs. M	Sind/Hong Kong	Second Generation	50	India Club Hong Kong
Mrs. N	Tamil	First Generation	37	Tamil Cultural Association
Mrs. P	Punjab	First Generation	46	Hong Kong Indian Women's Club
Mrs. R	Punjab	First Generation	46	Hong Kong Indian Women's Club
Mrs. W	Sind	First Generation	58	Hong Kong Indian Women's Club
Ms. A	Sind	Second Generation	17	None
Ms. B	Sind	Third Generation	16	None
Ms. C	Sind	Second Generation	15	Sai Baba Religious Centre
Ms. I	Sind	Third Generation	16	None
Ms. K	Maharashtra	Second Generation	15	None
Ms. M	West Bengal	Second Generation	18	Sai Baba Religious Centre
Ms. P	Sind	Second Generation	37	Hong Kong Indian Women's Club
Ms. S	Sind	Second Generation	20	None
Ms. T	Sind	Third Generation	26	Hong Kong Indian Women's Club
Ms. U	Tamil	First Generation	27	Tamil Cultural Association
Ms. X	Sind	Second Generation	36	Hong Kong Indian Women's Club



## Appendix II

# Council of Hongkong Indian Associations



### OBJECTS

The main objects of the Council also include the following:-

- i) To further the interests of residents of Hong Kong who are Indians or of Indian origin;
- ii) To enable Indian Associations to federate and co-operate by becoming members of the Council, and to act as the spokesman or the representative of such associations.
- iii) To consider, with the object of reaching a united view, all matters of policy on any major development affecting the member and to enter into such negotiations and take such actions as a united body as may be deemed necessary;
- iv) To assist in the development of Indians identity;
- v) To promote protect and develop common interest of the various members of the Council in the larger interest of the Community as a whole;
- vi) To develop, cement, and foster closer relationships, better understanding and spirit of co-operation between the Indian Community and people of Hong Kong.
- vii) To advance and encourage technical, propessional and general education for the benefit of Indian and other communities of Hong Kong;
- viii) To develop and promote better understanding between the Indian Community and Government of Hong Kong and other governments as well as various other cultural organisations;
- ix) To do all such other lawful things as are incidental or conducive to the attainment of the above objects or any of the

THE COUNCIL HAS TRIED TO LIVE UPTO ITS OBJECTS WITH THE CO-OPERATION OF THE COMMUNITY; MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL AND PARTICULARLY THE MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS.

## Associations Under CHIA

Name of Association	Year Established	Official Purpose	Constituency	Number of Members
The Indian Chamber of Commerce Hong Kong	1952	-Promotion of H.K Trade and Industry -Express the opinions of Indian mercantile community on economic matters	Permanent Hon. President Permanent Hon. Advisor The General Committee: Chairman; Vice Chairman(s), and Hon. Treasurer(s). Secretariat: Secretary General, Deputy Secretary, and Assistant Secretary.	500 and more Ordinary Members: Indian firms, individuals, corporation. Associate Members: Others.
The India Association Hong Kong	1965	See Appendix IV	President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, Ex.Officio, and a Committee with 15 Members	Around 400
The Hindu Association	1934	Looks after the socio-religious and spiritual needs of the Hindu community	Patrons, Honorary Advisor, Managing Committee: President, Vice President, Hon. Secretary, Hon. Treasurer, Hon. Secretary, And Members of the Managing Committee.	Around 12,000
India Club	1924-5	-Promotion of sporting activities and games -Promotion of social interactions between members irrespective of race, nationality or creed. -Promotion of Indian Art and Culture	President, Vice President(s), Hon. Secretary, Hon Treasurer, and Committee Members.	More than 300
The Hong Kong Indian Women's Club	1958	See Appendix V	Hon. Patron, Patron, President, Vice President, Hon. Treasurer, Hon Secretary, and Members of General Committee	Around 200
Khalsa Diwan Hong Kong, Sikh Temple	1902	The religious matters of Sikh community	President, Vice President, Hon. Secretary, Hon. Treasurer, Hon. Langar Secretary, Hon. Librarian, Hon. Auditor(s), Committee Members.	Around 5,000
The Nav Bharat Club	Around 1951	Sports Club	Patron, President, Vice President, Hon. General Secretary, Hon. Treasurer, Social Convenor, Chairman of Sports Board, Hon. Sports Board Secretary and Committee Members.	Around 200
Overseas Indian Organization	1991-2	Provide opportunities for younger Indian generations to learn about India	/	/
Non Resident Indian Association of HK Ltd	1995-6	/	/	/



## Appendix IV



THE INDIA ASSOCIATION  
HONG KONG  
P.O. BOX NO. 96625 T.S.T.,  
HONG KONG  
TEL: 5225596

# the india association hongkong

The India Association was founded in 1948. It was incorporated on 29th December, 1965.

The primary objective of the Association is as follows :-

1. To preserve and promote Indian culture among the younger generation of the Indian community.
2. To promote and encourage social intercourse in the Colony.
3. To support and subscribe to any charitable or public body and any institutions, society or club.
4. To provide for the delivery and holding of lectures, exhibitions, classes and conferences to advance the course of culture and education in particular the Indian culture.

## Appendix V



## The Hong Kong Indian Women's Club

P. O. BOX 3187  
HONG KONG

### INTRODUCTION:

The Hong Kong Indian Women's Club was founded in the year 1958. This is a charitable organization and is exempted under section 88 of the Inland Revenue Ordinance from any tax.

The main objects of the Club are:

"To do public and social work for the benefit of the Indian Community in Hong Kong"

"To assist and help the poor and destitute Indian ladies and children and improve their conditions of living."

"To co-operate with their ladies in Hong Kong - Indian or otherwise - in social, charitable, educational and cultural activities."

"To raise funds for the purpose of carrying out or advancing the objects of the Club."

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